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3

THE Drab Princess,
THE Black Cat,
AND THE Satisfying Break-up

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Seren 16](#)

[Linde 1](#)

[Viol 15](#)

[Seren 17](#)

[Prince Helios 3](#)

[Viol 16](#)

[Marietta 2](#)

[Seren 18](#)

[Viol 17](#)

[Seren 19](#)

[Viol 18](#)

[Seren 20](#)

[Viol 19](#)

[Seren 21](#)

[Viol 20](#)

[Seren 22](#)

[Marietta 3](#)

[Viol 21](#)

[Borden 3](#)

[Seren 23](#)

[Prince Helios 4](#)

[Viol 22](#)

[Seren 24](#)

[Marietta 4](#)

[Viol 23](#)

[Seren 25](#)

[Seren 26](#)

[Other Series](#)

The Drab Princess, the Black Cat, and the Satisfying Break-up Volume 3

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The Drab Princess, the Black Cat, and the Satisfying Break-up Volume 3

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My spirits soaring
with happiness and joy,
I took a big step forward,
following Lord Viol's lead.

Viol

A beautiful man who
doesn't let people get close.
Known as the Frosty Archmage
of the Third Mage Guild.

Seren

A duke's daughter
known as the Drab Princess.
Aiming to become a High Mage
to break off her engagement.



"Right?"

"The wind feels good.
It's surprisingly comfortable,
even though we're going so fast."

Seren 16

The Evolution of the Salon

“GOOD day to you!”

Goodness, I spoke a little louder than I’d intended. My steps were light as I entered the salon. Since yesterday, three other women, including Marietta, began attending the salon, and my excitement was a little too evident.

“Good day, Lady Seren. You seem in high spirits today.”

“It must be because her princess consort training has finally calmed down a notch.”

Lady Linde and Lady Ladia, already present in the salon, giggled. Was I so easy to read?

The salon was established as a training institution of sorts to allow a smooth transition into royal palace duties for those graduating from the Royal Academy. Thus, until now, the members had consisted only of His Highness Prince Helios, the men of the upper aristocracy, and myself—Prince Helios’s fiancée, the woman destined to become the future queen.

But ever since I’d overheard Prince Helios, Lord Mashlo, and the other young men talking about how Marietta ought to be queen instead of me, the salon was a painful space.

From that day on, I resolved to become a High Mage so that my engagement to Prince Helios could be amicably voided and dissolved... But I couldn’t let a soul know about it, so I’d been working on it in secret.

After finding out what Prince Helios, Lord Mashlo, and the others thought, I felt terrible. Every salon session since mentally exhausted me. I still couldn’t believe I could enjoy being in the salon environment again.

As part of Prince Helios’s plan to appoint more gifted women and commoners, Lady Linde, from a reformist duke’s household, and Lady Ladia, from a conservative earl’s household, had joined the salon as of yesterday, along with my sister Marietta, daughter of a neutral duke’s household. As a result, attending the salon stopped being a source of discomfort for me.

“Knowing I get to work with Marietta and you both makes me so happy,” I said. “I must have let it show on my face.”

“Aw. That’s so sweet of you to say that.”

I’d expressed myself honestly, and Lady Linde cracked a big smile. Grinning wasn’t ladylike, but Lady Linde, tall and slender with a chiseled face, pulled it off with perfect marks. I could see why she was so popular with the other women.

In contrast, Lady Ladia had beautifully wavy mid-length hair and was petite. She gently reprimanded Lady Linde in her dulcet voice.



“Lady Linde, His Highness is about to arrive, so you should be careful not to speak that way in front of the gentlemen. Some don’t appreciate that, now, do they?”

“I know. That’s why I did my best to be perfectly ladylike yesterday. But it’s exhausting,” Lady Linde sighed. “I can keep the act up for the duration of a ball, but we’ll be spending long stretches of time with these gentlemen. It’s going to slip out. Besides, Lord Riesz already knows my personality.”

“But Lord Riesz will surely keep it secret,” Lady Ladia assured.

“Of course, I will.”

“Yeek!”

A voice piped up from behind us, and Lady Ladia literally jumped. I was startled, too.

“Don’t just sneak up on us! Lord Riesz, you’re terribly bad-mannered, too,” Lady Linde chided. She looked the least surprised of any of us. She simply smiled wryly. She had a straight-talking personality and rarely got angry. A most broad-minded individual.

“Sorry, my apologies.” Lord Riesz didn’t seem bothered at all by her casual manner of speech. Perhaps because he did, after all, know Lady Linde’s personality well. “You know, about what you ladies were just discussing...” he began. “Lady Ladia is correct, but I agree with Lady Linde’s opinion. Fussing too much over decorum can lower productivity, and it’s much more fun for all if we can get along and be comfortable with one another.”

“Thank you,” Lady Linde smiled. “I think so, too.”

“Well, if anything comes up... I’ll cover for you.”

Lady Ladia’s worries melted into a smile when Lord Riesz made that offer. “If Lord Riesz says as much, then that reassures me. Let us show gratitude, Lady Linde.”

“Oh, yes, thanks for the help.” After thanking Lord Riesz, Lady Linde turned to Lady Ladia and said, “Thank you for your concern,” while smiling. The two came from opposite backgrounds, conservative and reformist, but they got along

well. Probably because our country was peaceful, there were no fierce factional disputes.

Before long, the salon door opened with the sound of lively laughing voices. Lord Mashlo and the other men entered. Marietta followed with an awkward expression.

“Hmm, looks like Seren’s younger sister is the one you should be worried about, not me.”

“Indeed. She looks troubled.”

Just as Lady Linde and Lady Ladia said, Marietta looked gloomy. Spotting me, she smiled with a look of relief and dashed over to us, away from the menfolk.

“Sister! I didn’t know you were here already!”

“Yes, I always aim to be the first, but today I lost to these two.” While the others chatted, I brought my face close to Marietta and murmured, “Are you sure that was wise? It’s not good to make yourself conspicuous, especially with the current timing...”

And that was when Marietta discreetly explained her predicament to me.

“But they came to my classroom expressly to collect me. They’re all older than me, so I couldn’t turn them down publicly.”

“Goodness, they came to the academy classroom to collect her?”

“I always thought they lacked the dignity of true nobles, but this... Those gentlemen are incorrigible.”

Lady Linde and Lady Ladia looked scandalized. Lord Riesz frowned.

“I’m just glad the seniors haven’t arrived yet. Although a scolding would be what they deserve. Coming in and making a ruckus like that... Marietta’s standing will be dragged down.” Turning to Marietta, Lord Riesz spoke plainly. “The blame lies with them, but you should be careful too, Marietta. The seniors disapprove of it when the others barge into the salon like that. It signals a lack of willingness to knuckle down and do proper work. You’d do best to bear that in mind.”

“Y-Yes, of course...” Marietta went visibly pale.

I gave Marietta some words of warning of my own, but I didn't use such direct language. I was certain Marietta had received enough of a shock already.

Although it was true that Marietta would have been in no position to decline. *Perhaps I should intervene on her behalf.*

"I will ask Lord Mashlo and the others to show more restraint," I said.

"Ah, wait." Lord Riesz stopped me as I made to address Lord Mashlo and the others. "If you say something, Seren, they might bristle. Leave this to me."

Lord Riesz smiled kindly, and I felt relieved. Certainly, he would be better than anyone at dealing with Lord Mashlo. No doubt he would listen without objection if it came from Lord Riesz.

"What's all the chatter about over here?"

"Marietta, His Highness and Lord Andel have not yet arrived. How about some tea?"

"The rest of you are welcome to join, too."

We couldn't help sighing internally when Lord Mashlo and the gentlemen accompanying him came over to drag Marietta off again. Lord Riesz gave us a nod and walked briskly over to Lord Mashlo and the others.

"If we're having tea, it's better to wait until His Highness arrives with the others," he said.

"Oh, but we can't talk freely in front of the seniors."

"And we didn't invite you, Riesz."

Lord Mashlo and the others registered their disappointment openly, sparing no thought for Lord Riesz's feelings or for his diplomatic suggestion. In fact, they didn't seem to realize why he'd spoken up in opposition in the first place.

"Goodness me. Have you not spared a thought as to why no one, least of all Marietta, wants to join you over here?" he sighed.

"What do you mean?"

Lord Mashlo immediately turned on Lord Riesz. But Lord Riesz merely took another step closer to Lord Mashlo, staring him down.

“Mashlo... All of you, in fact. When we decided to have Marietta join the salon, we declared that if she did become a member, we wouldn’t give her any special treatment, and we would be careful not to make Marietta look bad in any way on our behalf. Was that agreement just a lie?”

“It’s not like that. We’re not giving her special treatment.”

“It’s just tea.”

“We worked hard yesterday, after all.”

“Yeah, I worked harder than usual.”

“I see. You’re not even aware of it. This is indeed troublesome.” Lord Riesz’s shoulders slumped as the others argued their side.

What a situation! Lady Linde and Lady Ladia concealed it from their faces, but I was sure they were stunned.

“Think about it: you all blissfully drinking tea with Marietta while we’re the only ones working. What would the seniors think if they saw such a scene?” Lord Riesz challenged.

Lord Mashlo scowled bitterly, and the other three looked down awkwardly. After a brief silence, Lord Mashlo spoke in a quiet voice.

“I don’t think it’s so bad to drink tea when everyone isn’t together yet.”

“R-Right! Neither the seniors nor His Highness have even arrived yet.”

“Absolutely. In fact, we’ve had tea before the salon on many occasions.”

After the others backed up Lord Mashlo, Lord Riesz responded coldly.

“Yes, I know your values. What I want to discuss is the values of those around you.”

“What do we care?”

“I suppose you don’t. The four of you are free to drink tea or do whatever you like. What do I care about your reputations? You’ve already been judged incompetent. The seniors won’t care, either,” Lord Riesz said dismissively.

“Now listen here, you...!”

I expected Lord Riesz to remain calm and diplomatic, but his provocative words made me nervous about how things would unfold. Marietta gripped the sleeve of my uniform tightly. She, too, was worried.

I gently put my hand on Marietta's to calm her.

"The issue isn't with you. The issue is with you getting Marietta involved." Lord Riesz glanced at Marietta as he spoke. "Whatever your intentions, from the outside, it will look as if Marietta is elegantly drinking tea with men doting on her. This will be in stark contrast with the other ladies, who are working hard."

This silenced the others for a moment.

"If you care for Marietta," Lord Riesz continued, "you should keep your distance from her for a while and refrain from unnecessary conversations. And you certainly shouldn't be going to the academy and collecting her."

"What right do you have to impose sanctions on us, Riesz?" Lord Mashlo snapped. "Mind your own business."

"Sorry, but at this point, if you or Marietta's actions draw negative attention, it will jeopardize our new system. To the detriment of His Highness and these fine ladies here. Also, Lady Seren will be most saddened." Then Lord Riesz turned to Marietta, making direct eye contact. "Marietta, it may be difficult to speak up, but when you are inconvenienced, you must say so. If you do not, these fellows will only escalate their behaviors."

"Hey, come on. Marietta, we're not inconveniencing you, are we?"

The men muttered in pleading tones behind Lord Mashlo. Worried, I peeked at Marietta, but her head was held high, her expression dignified.

Oh yes, of course. My little sister was a girl who could express herself clearly.

"I'm sorry. I think that Lord Riesz is right." As Marietta began, the men's faces fell like sad dogs doused with buckets of water. "I definitely don't want His Highness, or anyone else, to suffer a loss of reputation because of me. In order to avoid projecting an undignified impression, please refrain from coming to the academy classroom to collect me."

Marietta continued, clutching the sleeve of my uniform tightly, "...I was pleased to have been approached by you to join the salon. At the moment, I can't hold my own against the others at all, but I want to be seen as useful in this salon, and I want to help His Highness and everyone else, just like my big sister."

"Marietta..."

"So, I'll do my best. I want to use my time at the salon to get as much work done as possible."

"How noble!"

The gentlemen stared at Marietta, deeply moved. Marietta's slender hand tightened around mine.

"Besides, you all worked so hard yesterday," she said. "You must like this work after all, right?"

"Well, we don't hate it, but..."

"Wonderful, then! Let's do our best together! Perhaps you can all advise me if I run into difficulties understanding some of the work?" she asked with a smile.

"Of course!"

"You can count on us!"

Marietta's smile widened, and the gentlemen all nodded. Lord Mashlo still had a disgusted expression but seemed reluctant to say anything more. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Simple, aren't they?" Lord Riesz, who had walked back over to us, smiled modestly.

"Thank you, Lord Riesz," I said.

I don't think I could have said it so clearly myself. Lord Riesz chuckled and said, "You're welcome." What would I do without his casual kindness?

After bowing to Lord Riesz, Marietta nodded at me, then strolled toward Lord Mashlo and the others.

The gentlemen seemed motivated, and Marietta trilled, "Let us all do our best

together!” Then they settled down to carry on yesterday’s work.

Marietta was always great at conveying her feelings while making the other person feel positive and motivated to work.

“You’re right, that worked because they *are* simple,” Lady Linde commented. “But since they’ve been galvanized to work, I suppose all’s well that ends well.”

“I’m just glad we sorted it out before His Highness and the other seniors arrived.” Lord Riesz sighed with relief.

Beside them, Lady Ladia stared at Marietta and Lord Mashlo with narrowed eyes. “But somehow, it annoys me. I wish they would have been caught and scolded.”

“Haha, you’re strict,” Lady Linde laughed. “But I sympathize with Lady Marietta in this case. It’s hard to take the reins when you’re being swooned over by idiots like them.”

“That’s certainly true. I learned a lot from this discourse.”

Lady Linde smiled wryly, while Lady Ladia seemed a little stiff and angry. Perhaps Lady Ladia would have spoken her mind more if we weren’t in the salon. It was hard to describe, but it was like her mouth was smiling, but her eyes... Her eyes were somewhat scary.

“Hmm, when it comes to men like that, their high peerage only makes them more dangerous,” Lady Ladia said. “I suppose they’ll spend their days doing a whole lot of nothing once they enter palace affairs officially, though.”

“Too true,” Lady Linde agreed. “I, for one, would not like to end up working with them.”

“I hear that men are childish when they are in school but that they mature fast after getting a job. We can only hope for that,” Lady Ladia said wistfully.

“Hey now, I’m a man too, you know.”

“But you’re one of the good ones, Lord Riesz,” I assured him. “I always feel that you can be relied upon.”

Wounded by their words, Lord Riesz shrugged, so I quickly interjected on his behalf. To this, the ladies both nodded emphatically.

“Absolutely right. We’d expect no less of Prime Minister Borden’s younger brother.”

“We heard that you often provide assistance to Lady Seren. Thank you. As friends of Lady Seren, we do appreciate it.”

Lord Riesz looked surprised for a moment, then broke into a pleased smile. “It’s an honor. And thank you two as well.”

“Hahaha, he’s blushing!” Lady Linde laughed. “But come, let us get to work. We can’t let the likes of them show us up.”

“That’s right. I don’t want to come second to children like that,” Lady Ladia huffed.

“Yes! Let us do our very best!” I raised my voice too.

I was so motivated, I wanted to roll up my sleeves on the spot. Having people who know and understand me in the salon... I couldn’t believe how much of a reassuring boost it was. I’d been anxious moments ago, but now I was glad everyone was prepared to knuckle down and work.

It was decided that I would essentially be teaching Marietta, and I trusted that she would come to me for guidance when she was ready. To secure time to instruct her, I would need to finish up my own work affairs swiftly.

Sitting at my desk, I tackled the mountain of documents in front of me for the moment.



“SORRY, I’m late.”

Prince Helios’s voice, coupled with the sound of the door opening, broke my concentration. When I looked, Prince Helios and the seniors entered the salon together. It was unusual for all three to come at the same time.

“Finally, you emerge from your documents.”

A small voice right next to me startled me.

“Marietta... How long have you been sitting there?” I asked.

“Um, about ten minutes, I’d say. You seemed to be concentrating deeply, so I

was just finishing up something from yesterday while I waited for you to take a break.” Marietta chuckled.

I must have been deep in concentration, not even noticing her sitting at the desk next to me.

“Prince Helios is terribly late.”

Just as Marietta said, when I glanced at the clock, two hours had passed since the end of the academy day. That was unusual for Prince Helios—he was usually the first to arrive.

“Let’s have some tea,” he said so all could hear him. “There’s something I want to talk to everyone about.”

Curious, I inclined my head. I wondered what he could possibly want to discuss. Yes, I was curious, but Prince Helios seemed bright in both expression and tone, so it probably wasn’t bad news. The thought made me feel secretly relieved.

“Let’s make the tea,” I said. “I’ll teach you how to make it.”

When I got to my feet, not only Marietta, but Lady Linde and Lady Ladia also stood up. We had no maids in the salon, so if you wanted to drink tea, it was only natural to make it yourself. Everyone needed to know where the teapot was.

“The teapot, tea leaves, and cups here are free for anyone’s use,” I explained. “If you want to drink tea or coffee at your desk, it’s customary that you make it for yourself.”

“Huh. Then, do the men make tea themselves?” Marietta asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “There are no maids in the salon. In fact, only men were here until I entered, you see?”

“Oh, indeed.”

“It’s been this way for generations. When we’re having tea together, I generally take the initiative and make it for everyone, though,” I said.

“Hmm, perhaps the seniors aren’t such fuddy-duddies after all,” Lady Ladia remarked.

“Of course. They’re strict about work but basically very nice. And sometimes Lord Riesz helps me when I’m preparing tea. In fact, anyone who can take a moment away from work will generally pitch in,” I explained. “Even the seniors, on occasion.”

“Hmm, I’ve revised my opinions of them,” Lady Linde said. “If the royal palace had a few more people with such flexible thinking, it’d be easier to work there.”

“Indeed. I suppose it will take a little longer for the gentlemen of the royal palace to become that enlightened. My father, though, well, he’d never manage it,” Lady Ladia sighed.

I understood how they felt. In the royal palace, more and more women and commoners were receiving appointments as civil officials. Still, some male nobles were openly sarcastic, asking them to do menial chores and treating them like servants. It was a way of thinking that belonged to an age that had already passed, but things couldn’t be expected to change overnight.

I gave a brief lecture on each person’s tea preferences and how to brew it. When everyone was seated and served, Prince Helios cleared his throat.

“Ahem. Today, I reported to His Majesty the King, with Andel and Kitz.”

“Ah, so that’s why you were late.” Lord Riesz nodded in understanding, indicating for the prince to continue.

“Since the salon began operating under the new system yesterday, I briefly reported on the current situation and discussed future prospects,” Prince Helios explained.

“Future Prospects...?” I muttered without thinking. I wasn’t sure we’d discussed future prospects when we spoke before...

“First, let’s talk about the status report. Lady Linde, Lady Ladia, Lady Marietta.”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“His Majesty expressed his high hopes and sends his encouragement.”

“Goodness, what high praise! I shall do my best to live up to expectations.”

“My father has also warned me not to do anything unseemly if I am to

participate.”

“I’ll do my best as well so as not to bring shame to my father or sister.”

After all three responded, Prince Helios smiled, amused. “While the king thinks highly of the reformist Tyde family, he showed a strong interest in the participation of Lady Ladia of the conservative Hapisery family in this new initiative.”

“That’s right, we especially want Lady Ladia to do her best.” Lord Kitz smiled. Lady Ladia responded with her own familiar, gentle smile.

“Of course, I’ll do my best. It seems it was a difficult choice for my father, but it’s a gamble for me too.”

Lady Linde and I shared a wry smile. Lady Ladia was far too honest.

“Lady Seren and Lady Linde are also here, so you needn’t worry,” she said.

“That’s right. Let’s help each other and provide results that will satisfy His Highness, His Majesty, and our fathers,” Lady Linde agreed.

“Marietta and I will do our best as well. Right, Marietta?” I addressed my sister.

“Y-Yes. I don’t know much, but I’ll give it all I’ve got.”

Marietta seemed like a fish out of the water, as I’d predicted. *After returning to our mansion, I’d best give her some instructions.* I’d planned to let her acclimate to the salon more first, but it would be better to explain to her the relationship between the houses as well as the personalities and standing of Lady Linde and Lady Ladia.

Marietta glanced at me. I gave her a reassuring smile. Then I returned my gaze to Prince Helios.

“Those are just the words I wanted to hear,” he said. “I have high hopes for all of you. And for the future to come.”

“Excuse me, Your Highness... You spoke about future prospects?” I inquired.

“Ah, about that. If this initiative goes smoothly and produces sufficient results, then in the next term, I would like to accept outstanding commoners as

salon members, too. I received the go-ahead for that plan today.”

“What...?”

Lord Mashlo and his group seemed at a loss for words.

I was surprised myself. I’d heard Prince Helios was considering that option in the future, but I didn’t expect it to develop so quickly.

“Then that means that Lord Andel and the others are in agreement?”

The two nodded in response to Lord Riesz’s question.

“Of course. Instead of nobles without ability or qualifications and only high family status, a commoner with grit and drive will be much more helpful to His Highness,” Lord Andel said.

“Well, if you’ve got grit, you can get even more done with connections,” Lord Kitz said. “The aristocracy has its uses, but times are changing.”

“I am of the same opinion.”

Lord Riesz agreed, and I too nodded emphatically. The more support Prince Helios had, the better, as far as I was concerned.

“So it all depends on us, and how well we do?” Lady Linde asked. “We must take this very seriously, then.”

“Indeed. Please do. Although there are other reasons why we want you to do your best, as well.” Lord Kitz smiled in response to Lady Linde’s muttering.

I had the strong impression we were currently in a period of transition, and that the salon would soon be undergoing great changes.

Linde 1

Talk of White Lilies and Daisies

“REALLY, why are Lady Marietta’s admirers so stupid? I’m so irritated.”

“Hahaha, I knew you were annoyed. You held it in well.”

As soon as we left the salon, Lady Ladia vented her ire. It was so funny, I couldn’t help laughing.

“And boy, did I hold it in. Unlike you, Lady Linde, I’m the type of person who prefers to wear a mask.”

“Well, just make sure you don’t leave that mask at home.”

Lady Ladia had the aura of a ladylike daisy flower. Always smiling and soft-spoken—but in truth, she was short-tempered with a sharp tongue. With that smile and her easygoing nature... Few would suspect she’s internally bitter.

The only ones who truly knew her were Lady Seren and me, since we spent the most time with her. Even around her family, she wore a mask.

I often heard that Lady Seren was pretty, modest, understated, and ephemeral, like baby’s breath flowers. But her reputation as a foil for His Highness and Lady Marietta always struck me unpleasantly, even before I got to know her.

Still, once I got to know her better, as I do now, I realized the ephemeral side of her was simply extreme sleep deprivation. Indeed, she behaved in a refined, modest manner, but she was strong inside like a warrior. I wouldn’t feel comfortable comparing her to a mere flower any longer.

There’s a huge discrepancy there between appearances and the truth.

Incidentally, I’d heard Lady Marietta compared to a pink rose and myself to a white lily. I think there’s a big difference between how the world sees us and

who we truly are.

“Hmm, well, those fellows are younger than us,” I pointed out. “And Lady Marietta is two years younger. It can’t be helped if they come across as immature. It makes the seniors seem even more reliable by contrast.”

“Indeed, you are right.”

“But I was amazed to hear commoners will be permitted to participate in the near future,” I remarked.

“Yes, His Highness is in quite a fix. Peers his own age are, well, immature, and the next generation has only female aristocrats of high rank. When the seniors graduate, only Lord Riesz and Lady Seren will be left to rely on in the salon. When you think about it, it’s a tough situation.”

“Certainly.”

“Even I, a conservative, was approached. You know, I still wonder if perhaps there isn’t some ulterior motive behind all this,” Lady Ladia said.

“Don’t say such scary things.”

“Hmm, if they hadn’t reached out to me, there’s a risk my father might have interfered. If you want to establish a new system, it’s standard procedure to get everyone on board: reformists, conservatives, and neutrals all.”

As ever, she was harsh when she spoke of her father.

Unfortunately for her, Lady Ladia was born into the Hapisery family, a leading conservative house. She was raised to support the menfolk and look after the household. She wasn’t allowed to step out of the shadow of her older brother, much less harbor her own dreams of becoming a civil official.

After we received the special request from Prince Helios to participate in the salon the other day, we were in the carriage on the way home when Lady Ladia suddenly declared, “I will get Father’s permission or die trying.”

She told me how she’d been eyeing the opportunity for a long time and that one day, she wanted to surpass her family’s expectations and seize her own dream of becoming a civil official. For her, participating in this salon would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

As she said, the current situation was a “gamble” for her. If her talent and hard work were noticed at the salon, the path to becoming a civil official would open up for her.

Lady Ladia was suppressed before she could even demonstrate her own ability simply because she was born a woman... And Lady Seren, whose future as the crown prince’s fiancée was set in stone, shouldered a huge amount of responsibility. For the two of them, the salon must have been like a battlefield where they could never rest.

“Those young men are too laid-back. Just like my older brother,” Lady Ladia lamented. “It irritates me. If you’re a noble and a man, you’re automatically given preferential treatment. So they take advantage of everything. But the times are changing. I’d like to show them what’s what, for sure.”

“Oh dear, you are scary, my lady.”

“Well, excuse me. But you know, isn’t it shameful how they chase after skirts when they’re supposed to be working?”

“I agree with you there. That’s hard to accept.”

“You know, I’ve made up my mind.”

Suddenly, Lady Ladia’s tone hardened in contrast to the easygoing way we’d been chatting.

I looked at her, surprised, and her big, navy-blue eyes stared back at me. She was smiling, but I sensed deep determination in those eyes.

“First of all, I will achieve results at this salon, and grasp the chance to become a civil official. If I can manage that, even after graduating from the academy, I will be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the likes of Lady Seren and Lady Marietta.”

Lady Ladia grinned. I felt certain she would do just as she claimed.

“I’m happy for you,” I said. “I never thought you and I would both be taking the civil official route. I will do my best as well, so as not to be left behind by you or Lady Seren.”

Smiling, we both agreed. Then Lady Ladia’s smile suddenly turned dark.

“I was lucky enough to get a few lazy boys within my grasp. I look forward to teaching them a lesson and *rehabilitating* them. It’ll be a good way for me to relieve stress.”

I was taken aback.

Was she going to vent her anger toward her older brother on the young men of the salon? Just what, exactly, was she planning to do...?

Viol 15

Progress is Good

A mass of wind swirling with terrifying force hit the center of my barrier, and I waited with excitement for the power to be unleashed.

Beads of sweat sparkled on Lady Seren's forehead as she controlled it. Her eyes narrowed, and her lips twisted. As she desperately held the raging mass of wind steady, she seemed to be giving it her all.

But the mass of wind, which at first had oscillated this way and that, was now steady in the center of the barrier, indicating the level of control Lady Seren had achieved.

To have made it this far—such progress.

“All right, and release.”

As I spoke, the mass of wind instantly evaporated. The wind blades, freed from the force that controlled them, scattered in all directions with vicious force, piercing my barrier wall with sharp zinging sounds.

An errant blade, flying toward my nose, was stopped at the last moment by the transparent, protective wall.

“Oh no! Vi?!!!”

Lady Seren dashed to me, her face drained of color.

There was no need for concern. I, of course, was on guard around those blades. I'd cast my barrier in three layers, with protective walls around myself and Lady Seren. No need for alarm at all.

“Ph-Phew. It doesn't appear that you were harmed,” she sighed.

Actually, could you please stop groping me all over like that? It tickles, and I fear letting forth an unmanly squeak.

“Worry not. There was never any chance of impact,” I reassured her.

“But I thought it hit you in your sweet face. I'm so glad you're all right.” Lady Seren hugged me tightly and then muttered in a determined tone, “If I can't

control the trajectory of the blade after it explodes, it's meaningless..."

"It is, indeed, extremely difficult."

Still, it was a necessary skill she would need to master. There's a limit to barrier spells, and there are often situations where you only want the blade to fly in a specific direction, such as when there are crowds or something else nearby that you don't want to hit.

"Still, you can go on and master that after you've become a High Mage," I said.

"No, I can't! If anything happened to you, Vi, or Lord Viol... Well, I think my heart would simply stop beating!"

Actually, if anything happened to Lady Seren, my heart would stop beating. Societally speaking, I'd be done for.

"Then I hope you can pull it off next week. But the hour has grown late. Let us leave it here for today," I said.

For her intermediate-level magic, the destructive power of her scattered blades was tremendous. My barrier, after much battering, had received a lot of damage. Things were proceeding in the right direction; make no mistake.

"Okay. Now it's time for dessert! *Hehehe*," she giggled, in high spirits, and put me down on the table.

"You look like you're in a good mood today," I commented. "Has the salon been going well?"

Lady Seren was visibly light on her feet, and her expression was bright. I'd noticed it before the special training started, but I remained patient, with plans to ask her in-depth during teatime. Today's special training was over. Thus, there was no harm in chit-chat.

Lifting the dessert basket from the table beside the bed, Lady Seren smiled happily. "Yes, very much so! The introductory training for the three ladies ended today, so starting tomorrow, each will receive in-depth guidance from different mentors."

"They are all going to learn different things?"

“Yes, Lady Linde wants to learn from Lord Kitz because her goal is to study finance. Lady Ladia said she was desperate to learn about maritime transport, and so she will learn from Lord Andel.”

“Didn’t you say yesterday that the girl named Ladia is a conservative? Maritime transport, now, that’s the domain of reformists, is it not?”

“That is why she wants to learn it,” Lady Seren said.

“Strikes me as odd. And Lady Linde is the daughter of the Duke of Tyde, isn’t she? So she’s aiming for finance?”

When it came to finances, the Third Mage Guild often had heated battles with the budget. I did hope she wouldn’t become a formidable foe.

“Yes. Lady Linde always says that doing calculations is more fun than talking to people, so it’s a no-brainer choice. She wants to spend the rest of her life staring at numbers.”

“Lady Seren, you do have some unusual friends. Incidentally, who is to be mentoring your sister?”

“I am to mentor her myself.”

“Hmm, well, that would be the safest option.”

“Marietta doesn’t have any particular aspirations, and when I become a High Mage, there’s a high possibility she will become a candidate for queen. I thought it would be beneficial if I taught her everything I have learned so far.”

“I see.”

Lady Seren was making steady preparations so there wouldn’t be any trouble after she left.

“Oh my! Today it’s a whole new level of lovely!” Lady Seren cooed with excitement after opening the dessert basket. As she removed a platter from the basket, I smelled something sweet.

Ahh. What an enchanting scent...

My nose and whiskers twitched involuntarily. I was curious about what kind of dessert it was, and when I stretched out my neck, Lady Seren chuckled and

placed the platter in front of me.

“Oh! How absolutely stunning!” Colorful macarons, all in a row, caught my eye. “How many colors are there?!” I exclaimed.

“This is the first time I’ve seen such gorgeous-looking macarons. They’re lovely!”

It was not merely the usual pink, orange, brown, and white macarons you often see. No, there was yellow, pale red, purple and light blue, bright red, beige and green, vivid yellow-green like young grass, azure like the deep sea, dark brown the shade of strong coffee, and black like twilight.

How on earth do they achieve such subtly different colors?

“So small and cute, aren’t they?” Lady Seren said.

“Even I could manage to down one in one bite,” I replied.

The macarons on the platter were much smaller than usual; the cute little macarons utterly distracted Lady Seren.

“Vi. Which do you want to eat first?”

“Hmm. Now there’s a question.”

All were colorful and gorgeous to behold, and each had a slightly different scent, confounding me.

“With so many distinct scents to choose from, I must consider not just the color but also the fragrance. That makes it hard.”

“The scents? They all smell sweet, don’t they?”

Lady Seren randomly picked two macarons and brought one, then the other, to her nose. Then she gazed at me with rounded eyes.

“Why, they are completely different!” she exclaimed.

“Indeed, that yellow one has a refreshing lemon scent, but what is that black one? I think I’ve smelled it before, but I can’t place it.”

“Even from a distance, you can smell the difference?” she asked.

“Well, my sense of smell is sharper than a human’s.”

It might not have been as good as a real cat's, but it was enhanced enough in this form. I could smell a different scent from each of the macarons.

"Well, why don't I start with that shiny black one?" I said. "I can't even imagine what it might taste like."

"Oh yes, I might want to try something unusual too."

"In that case, you can't predict the taste of the yellow-green or azure macarons from the smell alone. Also, the darkest brown one has a color like cocoa or coffee, but it smells surprisingly spicy."

"A spicy scent? But macarons are usually sweet. I can't imagine what it would taste like. Well then, shall I try it?"

We both went for novelty, and Lady Seren picked up two macarons whose taste was impossible to predict simply from their scent and appearance.

Lady Seren held the black macaron out to me. I gave it another experimental sniff but still couldn't place it. It seemed familiar, but even with the scent under my nose, I couldn't identify it. It was a little vexing.

Exchanging glances with Lady Seren, I took the macaron into my mouth. There was a light crunch, and the fragrance I smelled wafted across the roof of my mouth.

Ahh.

I was struck dumb. *Ahh, what a challenge!*

The scent hitting the roof of my mouth was undoubtedly the scent of charcoal. Indeed, it was black in color. I first thought charcoal was mixed in somehow, but it wasn't particularly rough. After the initial crunch, the soft inner dough brought a gentle sweetness.

Even the cream part inside was black, but I didn't know what it was.

Something was mixed in—something highly scented. Not quite nuts. Whatever it was, it was finely crushed and impossible to identify by shape. All that was visible were tiny black dots scattered throughout the black cream.

How frustrating to not be able to understand and express how delicious it was in words.

If I had put this light and fragrant macaron in my mouth after eating other sweet macarons, perhaps the contrast would have highlighted something tangible. I regretted not having done so.

“Amazing...”

Lady Seren managed only this statement before she was at a loss for words.

“It seems that what I ate was mixed with charcoal,” I told her.

“Charcoal? You mean the stuff that’s made when you set fire to wood and burn it?”

“Yes, I think so. No wonder it was such a deep black. It was so light, so delicious.”

Lady Seren seemed flabbergasted. No doubt she’d never imagined such a substance would be added to a dessert.

“How was yours, Lady Seren?”

“Well, it was spicy but sweet.”

“It was sweet?!”

Apparently, the cream part was amazing.

“I think it contained black pepper, cinnamon, and cardamom.”

Lady Seren was adamant that several types of ingredients were in the mix. In other words, there appeared to be many kinds of spices in the cream and white chocolate.

“When you put it in your mouth, the fragrance of each spice spreads delectably as you chew. The cream is sweet, but the changing aromas really make it a taste sensation...” she described.

I’d never heard of such a thing! I would have liked to try that one myself!

“And what’s more...”

There’s more?!

“Something in the middle of the cream had a different texture. I wonder if it was a finely chopped biscuit. And there was a crunchy layer that smelled of

sweet butter. It also gave off a hint of spice. And it gives off a lingering spicy impression at the end.”

It sounds beyond delicious!

“Hehehe, oh Vi, stop. You look like you’re about to drool.”

I wiped my mouth with my forepaw. *Lady Seren, you’re drooling yourself.*

Embarrassed, I curled into a ball, and Lady Seren’s hand, as pure white as the belly of a fish, gently caressed my ear. Vexed, I planned to remain facing away from her, but my tail flicked out, stroking Lady Seren’s hand and expressing my true happiness.

I snuck a glance at Lady Seren. She seemed happy, too, so I suppose it could be allowed.

“Oh, and Vi. This one looks delicious, too.”

Presented with a cute, pure-white macaron held right at the tip of my nose, I couldn’t help but open my mouth. Those macarons were simply too delicious. Moreover, even though there were so many types, I had a hunch each was made from a different batch of macaron dough, giving it an individual texture. Hats off to the chef!

“Let’s ask for them to make this for us again,” she said.

After eating several rounds of macarons with a happy-looking Lady Seren, I received a few wrapped up to take home. I went home that day feeling very satisfied indeed.



ON Voidday of that same week, I gazed solemnly at the mirror.

I had shaved my beard, and recently I’d been trying to deploy magic to recover from fatigue before bed, so my skin wasn’t in bad shape. I was relieved that my appearance wasn’t too terrible.

There was a high society ball that night.

It struck me that it had been a month since the last soiree. As far as dancing goes, after my screw-up before, Count Blaze had me thoroughly trained right up

until the last moment. In fact, I'd improved so much that it barely compared to how I was just a month ago. Today, I felt no anxiety over it at all.

On the prior occasion, Prince Helios had glared at me, saying, "If you insist on dancing with my fiancée, I must ask you to at least refrain from stomping on her feet." All that was left now was to show off my new dancing chops, or, should I say, dancing feet.

Like last time, I wore a black tailcoat with silver embroidery and quickly gathered back my hair.

Apparently, many men change outfits each time they go to an evening party. Since I'd only ever attended one, I didn't have any other clothes. Well, unless I participated frequently in the future, I doubted anyone would care.

Ah, but since I'll be seeing Lady Seren up close, I wonder if it wouldn't be better to have something new.

With that thought in mind, I walked to my usual black coat.

I removed the clasp adorning the breast of the coat and fastened it to my tailcoat so that it connected the collar to the breast pocket. Then I stood in front of the mirror again.

Hmm, not bad.

The embroidery on the tailcoat was silver, like the intricately and beautifully crafted clasp. It was such a good match; it almost seemed they ought to have come as a set.

This clasp, awarded to me by Lady Seren as remuneration after she had successfully subjugated a monster for the first time, had a complex and detailed pattern of stars arranged in a circular moon shape. It was a fine piece, painstakingly crafted. In fact, people who spotted me wearing it often asked the name of the craftsman.

It was an exquisitely crafted accessory alone, but it also had a thin chain extending from the moon decoration, with several three-dimensional stars hanging from it. If I danced wearing it, the small stars would sway as if they were dancing.

It would look even more gorgeous than before.

An item that Lady Seren gifted to me. If she saw me wearing it, it might bring her happiness.

“All right. I suppose I’m off, then.”

After finishing my preparations—which were meager compared to the troubles women must undergo—I headed to the royal palace.



AFTER arriving at the venue, I finished registering and quickly walked inside.

I got a rough idea of timing and positioning last time, so today I timed my entrance to the minute to arrive at the optimal moment. Sure enough, the quadrille was about to end.

Since Prince Helios and Lady Seren should be dancing soon, I should reach them before the song ends.

Lightly deploying covert magic, I moved further into the ballroom.

The royal family tended to dance at the far end of the hall, so I’d need to move quickly, or the song would end too soon. As I made my way across, the quadrille would end, and everyone would take hands and begin dancing. No doubt Lady Seren and Prince Helios would start dancing, too.

Hastening my pace, I spotted a small opening.

Prince Helios always has ample space to dance compared to the other dancers. Everyone maintained the proper distance. That had to be the spot where he was. That would help me locate him faster.

The moment I spotted the two dancing through the space between people, I was at a loss for words.

The two of them were so perfect.

First, Lady Seren’s beauty struck me. Last time, her light blue dress highlighted her modest good looks as it followed her movements and swaying amber hair, but today she looked completely different.

She had, shall we say, a subdued yet rich beauty.

At first glance, the dress appeared to be a pure white one with delicate embroidery. However, perhaps because of the reflective threads woven into it, the navy-blue tailcoat that Prince Helios wore was reflected in it here and there, and the colors stood out vividly.

The white dress also reflected the colorful gowns of the other dancing ladies, which made its impression change second by second. Combined with its simple, A-line design, the dress projected a mysterious charm and a refined yet gorgeous aura.

And the reason the dress looked so attractive was most likely due to Lady Seren herself. Tonight, white ribbons were weaved into her amber hair, which was coiled up softly and loosely in many layers. Stray hairs intentionally scattered about her face, and her thin white neckline exuded an image of sophisticated beauty.

I used to think she was cute and pretty. Tonight, Lady Seren was beautiful. Strikingly so.

Regrets filled me.

Now I knew enough to see how Prince Helios's dancing skills brought out the best of Lady Seren's beauty. A good lead can keep a woman's posture beautiful, lend to her graceful movements, and afford her a relaxed expression.

That was why she looked so beautiful and sophisticated dancing.

It was frustrating, but in terms of dance skills, I couldn't compete with Prince Helios, who had been training since he was a child.

However, I thought, I might not be able to dance as sophisticatedly as the prince, but I will make Lady Seren laugh and enjoy herself instead.

Lady Seren herself also said that as long as the dance was enjoyable, that was all that mattered.

But first, I needed to catch Lady Seren's attention.

If I waited a few moments, the song would end. I manipulated my stealth spell to be slightly visible, even to someone dancing. No doubt Lady Seren would, at some point, turn in such a way that she'd spot me.

Still, I didn't want anyone else to speak to me, so it would be better to adjust the spell to discourage anyone from engaging me in conversation. I was still thinking about that, preparing to cast another fresh spell, when someone addressed me before I could do it.

"Ah, so you came after all."

Someone placed a hand on my shoulder, and I cringed. Only one person would approach me without a preamble and speak to me in that manner.

"Borden," I grumbled.

"So, what's this? Have you caught the dancing bug?"

"Count Blaze has, incidentally, given me a passing mark," I replied to his jovial question frostily and Borden's eyes grew large.

"In such a short time, too! I'd heard you were practicing seriously, but I confess, I am surprised."

"It would not do to step on Lady Seren's foot again," I said curtly.

"I see. I knew it, then, you're..." But Borden cut himself off mid-mutter and fixed me with a pitying look.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked, suspicious.

"Ah, no reason. After all, everyone's free to dance."

"Oh, it looks like the dance is about to end. I'm going now."

"Right. Give it your best shot."

Leaving Borden frowning to himself, I moved forward.

Just as the song ended, Lady Seren and Prince Helios exchanged elegant greetings on the floor. I quickened my steps to reach her before anyone else intruded.

At that moment, I glimpsed something fluffy in a gorgeous yellow hue approaching them from the opposite side. Wondering who this could be, I cast my gaze and made eye contact with a girl in a yellow dress.

The girl smiled.

Ah, of course. Lady Seren's little sister. The girl always seemed to dance with Prince Helios at balls. No doubt that was why she'd shown up now, too.

Lady Seren's sister and I waited with bated breath for the two of them to part.

As Lady Seren and Prince Helios gazed into each other's eyes and whispered something to one another, my heart throbbed.

After sharing a beautiful smile, the two finally dropped hands, and Lady Seren looked up.

Then, at last, our eyes met.

"Lady Seren."

When I spoke her name, Lady Seren's eyes crinkled happily. Good. She did not seem to mind.

As I stood, relieved, the prince's back twitched, and his dark blue suit tail fluttered.

"Archmage Viol...!"

Prince Helios's brows drew together, but then his expression cleared. I bowed my head respectfully before him.

"Last time, I made the mistake of stepping on Lady Seren's foot due to my lack of skill, so I've been training hard for the past month. I was hoping I might have a chance to make amends."

My reasoning made it hard for the prince to refuse, so he muttered, "It is not for me to refuse," his words tinged with frustration. In other words, if Lady Seren accepted me, the prince would have no right to prevent her.

Well, those are the customs of dance, to begin with, though.

Anyway, the prince danced with many young ladies each time, including Lady Seren's sister, so he had no right to refuse on her behalf.

Still, Prince Helios's complaint about me at the last ball had turned into a rampant rumor, reaching even Count Blaze, who hadn't even attended that evening. So I needed to receive the prince's forgiveness in order to be able to dance with Lady Seren again.

And, his approval I obtained.

Now all that remained was to see if Lady Seren said yes. If so, I could dance with her again.

So much to go through.

Passing by Lady Seren, Prince Helios took her sister's hand, and Lady Seren curtsied to him. I waited for her to lift her head, and then I spoke.

"Lady Seren, I apologize for the previous incident. Was your foot all right?"

Lady Seren and I would usually have no reason to speak to one another, so for the benefit of prying eyes, I apologized. Lady Seren understood and smiled sweetly in return. Today, she was as beautiful as the holy mother herself.

"It's quite all right. You stepped on my foot but didn't place your weight on it. So please, there is no need for concern."

"Well, I am relieved to hear that."

Lady Seren, facing me, moved her eyes from my collar to my chest, a blush staining her cheeks. The corners of my mouth curled slightly; she had noticed the silver clasp.

She appeared to be pleased. I was glad I'd put it on, after all.

"I've been practicing hard since then," I assured her. "I promise I won't step on your feet again. Please, would you honor me with another dance?"

I gazed at Lady Seren, and she lifted her eyes from the clasp to mine. We stared at each other for a long moment.

"...Yes, gladly!"

Her smile was like a spring flower in full bloom.

I'd thought her a sophisticated beauty tonight, but at this moment Lady Seren's open, unadorned smile was just adorable. Indeed, her true loveliness pierced my very heart.



Seren 17

Surely, This is the Last One

CLAD in my white dress, I gazed at myself in the mirror and got myself in the right frame of mind.

It was the night of a palace soiree.

If I passed the exam and became a High Mage, this would be my last evening party; I was emotional. Since it was the last one, I wanted to end on a high note and do all I could.

“Lady Seren, you are a heavenly beauty!”

Rince’s praise was too much.

Nevertheless, I don’t believe I’ve ever looked this beautiful. Rince was a true master at her craft.

The fabric used for this particular dress was a foreign import my father had just purchased and planned to use in trade. The fabric formed the base of the dress and stood out beautifully under the many layers of detailed pure white embroidery and lace.

The ostensibly pure white dress picked up the colors of its surroundings, demonstrating a variety of hues and different aspects because it was reflective material, just like a mirror. It was a brilliant, multifaceted import.

My duty as the daughter of a duke this night was to show off the splendor of this fabric and make every other noble lady want it for their own dresses.

I had my hair pulled up so that the dress would be exposed. To emphasize the dress’s design, white ribbons and small flowers made of the same material were woven into my hair, which was coiled up in multiple layers. This way, I complemented the dress without competing with it.

And with Prince Helios being such a good dancing lead, he would show off the dress to the best effect with every twirl and spin.

I had danced with Prince Helios many times during the duration of our engagement, but tonight would be the last. I wanted to dance perfectly—beautifully—and express my gratitude for all our years together.

After getting into the carriage, I took a deep breath to calm down.

I gently rubbed my handkerchief with my thumbs and felt a pang of sadness when nothing poked me as it usually did. Lately, I'd been carrying about a handkerchief on which I'd mounted the earrings Lord Viol had given me. It had become a lucky talisman to me, and toying with it had become a habit.

Without those earrings, I felt lonely and dissatisfied... Once again, I realized how much of a boost those earrings had given me.

Come to think of it, will Lord Viol invite me to dance again? I wondered. According to Vi, Lord Viol has been diligently taking dance lessons, and it sounded like he planned to attend tonight's ball...

Remembering how thrilling that last dance had been, my lips naturally curved into a smile. My tense body loosened up, and happiness welled inside me, softly and warmly filling my heart.

Since I may never participate in a high society ball again, I wish I could dance with Lord Viol like that one last time.

I gripped my handkerchief tightly as though to imbue it with the power of my deepest wish.



“YOU look particularly beautiful today,” Prince Helios complimented me. “Did you import the materials for that dress?”

“Yes, Father said it’s a most splendid piece and that I must wear it to the ball. The dress is made from a type of fabric called Kattir,” I explained.

“It’s certainly attracting attention. Everyone seems fascinated by it.”

“Then it was worth wearing tonight. It’s a truly splendid fabric,” I said.

In most cases, I was the first recipient of the goods my father obtained through trade. Wearing a simple-cut dress with no other embellishments would allow attention to fall naturally on the fabric itself or whatever accessories I wanted to show off at the time.

It was significant for me to wear these pieces to demonstrate Father's newly imported items in front of the royal family.

At a subsequent ball, Marietta would wear the same material with different tailoring and embellishments, allowing the material to exhibit a glamorous new charm.

Whether simple, gorgeous, graceful, or lovely, Marietta and I were responsible for showcasing the different aspects of the merchandise Father imported.

If I left the duke's residence, we would no longer be able to divide the role between us. Still, Mother could step in and demonstrate the simple side as readily as me. I wasn't too concerned.

"Are you a little nervous? You're moving more stiffly than usual."

Prince Helios looked at me with some concern, and I smiled wryly. I was hiding it as best I could, but it seemed I was transparent.

"It's a beautiful dress, so I want to make it look as good as possible, but maybe because of the material, it's surprisingly heavy. I can't move well in it," I confessed.

"I see, it's an interesting fabric, but there's room for improvement, perhaps," he noted.

"I agree. I think I'll get tired if I dance to too many songs. When we get Marietta's dress made, it might be better to reduce the amount of shiny material in the fabric or the number of overlapping layers."

Even as we conversed about dresses, Prince Helios leaned his body closer to mine, and his arm tightened around me. With a slight adjustment to Prince Helios's posture, it became much easier for me to dance.

"It might be better not to force yourself to dance too much today. I will escort

you with all my heart,” he vowed.

Prince Helios’s dancing technique was indeed stunning. I felt I could dance with a lighter step than before.

“It’s much easier to dance now,” I told him.

“Good. Let us dance at a slow pace today without overdoing it.”

“Yes, please.”

I appreciated his kind consideration. I looked up at Prince Helios, smiling as I thanked him. Unusually, he shifted his eyes away from me.

Then he tightened his mouth as if he had something to say.

“Prince Helios? Is something amiss?” I asked.

“No, it’s just... You’re full of zest lately, Seren. I suppose that the princess consort training was quite grueling?”

I considered his question. An aspect of truth was there. I always focused on pleasing my teachers to avoid inconveniencing Prince Helios. It was all I thought of, and it was indeed draining.

For different reasons than the ones I have today, I studied my heart out as if wild hounds were chasing me.

“It’s true that I was most determined to do my best every day, but...I wouldn’t say it was grueling,” I said.

The training was tough, but I found it rewarding. That kept me going. Although it hurt my heart to think that, despite all the work I did to win recognition from my tutors and the king and queen, I ultimately became a source of discomfort for Prince Helios.

“Recently, everyone smiles a lot in the salon, don’t they?” Prince Helios suddenly said. “Lady Linde and the others seem to be enjoying it.”

“Yes, I’ve been good friends with Lady Linde and Lady Ladia for a long time. They’ll be vital assets due to their differing strengths, so I’m glad they were accepted into the salon. I am most happy with how things have turned out.”

None other than Prince Helios championed for them to enter the salon. I

spoke with gratitude.

“Every day is very fulfilling. Thank you, Prince Helios.”

“I’m not the one who you should thank. It was Mashlo and the others who made the original proposal, and Andel and Kitz were the ones who actually selected them.”

“Even so, you put together the plan and persuaded the parliament, including His Majesty and Prime Minister Borden,” I insisted.

“Well, I see your point. ...Thank you.”

I wasn’t sure why he’d thank me there, but Prince Helios seemed pleased, so I let it slide.

“Thanks to Lady Linde and Lady Ladia joining the salon, my work has progressed, and the atmosphere in the salon has softened somewhat,” I said. “I think Marietta is also doing her best. ...Overall, work efficiency has improved.”

“I agree. There were some concerns, but productivity has certainly improved.”

Neither Prince Helios nor I wanted to say it out loud, but there had been concerns that Marietta joining the salon might make Lord Mashlo and his group overly rowdy. Marietta and Prince Helios would still have to deal with that issue at some point, whether they wanted to or not, after I left the salon.

I was secretly relieved that this happened while I could oversee the transition. That way, I could perhaps help if anything came up.

But in the end, I wasn’t very useful. Lord Riesz intervened to resolve the issue. Or, it was more like he had stuck a pin in it.

Since being blasted by Marietta, the four gentlemen worked hard every day. They were working harder than before, so Marietta’s presence must have been motivating them.

We had only really just begun under the new system, so there would be some teething issues, but I had a feeling the salon would go well in the future.

“Is there any trouble or dissatisfaction with the three newcomers?” Prince Helios asked.

“Lady Linde and Lady Ladia seem satisfied to receive specialized guidance leading into their desired fields,” I said.

“I see, that’s good. How about Marietta?”

“Marietta wasn’t originally aiming to become a civil official, and she’s two years younger than us, so she’s struggling more than the other two.”

“I can see why.”

“However, yesterday, my father returned from the country of Ligalea, so Marietta and I consulted him about the matter.”

“Right, he returned from a trading excursion.”

“Yes. And it was decided Marietta would receive guidance from the teachers who taught me. It will only be on Voiddays, but I think it’s better for her to learn the basics from the professionals.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it? I’m sure Marietta will be reassured as well.”

“Yes. She was still uneasy but seemed overjoyed with this new plan.”

“I see.”

Prince Helios smiled, relieved, then suddenly did a double-take, his expression clouding over. He looked almost doleful; I couldn’t identify anything we’d just discussed that would make him look that way. I tipped my head to one side in curiosity, and that was when Prince Helios sighed.

“Even though I just reflected on it the other day, the conversation turned to work again. I’m sorry,” he said.

Come to think of it, he said something similar when we went to town together. I couldn’t help but smile. There was no reason for him to apologize. In a way, this current conversation was really par for the course.

“The salon is a common topic of conversation, after all,” I assured him, then giggled. “...Hehe, I, too, might have said something similar the other day.”

“I didn’t intend to talk about work. I simply...”

When I lifted my head, Prince Helios averted his eyes from me.

Recently, whenever Prince Helios spoke with me at the salon, he often

averted his eyes and muttered like this. And the instructions he used to relay to me himself, he now often conveyed through Marietta.

The change wasn't immediately obvious, but Lord Riesz, who sat near me at the salon, also noticed it. It was there if anyone cared to catch it.

Thinking about what's to come, this change might be good. Perhaps Prince Helios finds it easier to speak to Marietta than to me. Perhaps, all this time, he struggled to converse with me yet forced himself through it anyway. The thought filled me with regret.

I observed Prince Helios, waiting for him to speak as he struggled for words. At the very least, I wanted to listen to whatever Prince Helios had to say until the end.

After hesitating, Prince Helios took a small breath and slowly turned his face toward me. Staring straight at me, his expression nervous, Prince Helios whispered, "I just... I'm glad you seem to be enjoying yourself, Seren. I just wanted to say that."

He hadn't wanted to discuss work. He'd wanted to say something relatively trivial, and he'd been deeply embarrassed by it. I was amazed and taken aback by his confession.

Just before the song ended, Prince Helios again whispered into my ear. "I'll do my best to run the salon so you can keep smiling, Lady Seren."

"Prince Helios... Thank you."

I wondered if he might have noticed I was feeling awkward at the salon. The thought made me grateful, and I wanted to express that gratitude from the bottom of my heart.

When we bowed to each other and dropped our hands, Prince Helios's gaze slid past me. A look of relief appeared on his face as if he had just been liberated from a source of significant tension.

I knew who he was looking at without having to turn around.

How embarrassing, I thought.

From his expression, it was plain to see that Marietta, not I, brought Prince

Helios a sense of relief when he was with her.

I'd been by his side as his fiancée all this time, but I'd failed to become a person of trust for Prince Helios. That was enough to make me feel ashamed of my inadequacy, but what disappointed me most was my own shallowness. How Prince Helios felt the need to elevate me and tiptoe around my feelings.

How spoiled I had been. It was not the prince who ought to have been making allowance for me, but I who should have been showing more care for him. My immaturity seemed wretched enough to drown me, and I felt a sudden urge to cry well up inside.

Lifting my chin to prevent an errant tear, I spotted a conspicuously dark figure appear behind Prince Helios. My attention was captured by this unmistakable figure.

Yes. It was Lord Viol.

"Lady Seren."

Hearing those shapely lips speak my name, my sinking feelings buoyed.

Just thinking that Lord Viol was watching over me alleviated the urge to cry I'd been wrestling with and, strangely, made me feel stronger. I wondered if I felt so relieved looking at him because he'd watched over me and guided me during the battle with those terrifying monsters.

Lord Viol approached us quickly, bowed deeply to Prince Helios, and spoke.

"Last time, I made the mistake of stepping on Lady Seren's foot due to my lack of skill, so I've been training hard for the past month. I was hoping I might have a chance to make amends."

Those words were enough to snap me right out of it.

Yes.

He was right. It was just as Lord Viol said.

Simply feeling down wouldn't resolve anything. When you notice your own failures, you have to do what you can to make amends. I couldn't believe I'd gotten so upset as to let something so vital slip my mind.

This was probably going to be my last ball. It was good that I'd realized my own inadequacies.

I only had a few short weeks left, but I would support Marietta as much as possible. I would pass on all the knowledge I had to Marietta—as much of it as she could take in.

And, so that Prince Helios did not have to worry about me or anyone else, I would do my best to smile as much as possible during the remaining salons.

I was grateful to Lord Viol for enabling me to make such forward-thinking determinations.

Before me, Prince Helios said, "It is not for me to refuse," and turned away.

I curtsied to Prince Helios, who slipped by me and walked toward Marietta.

"Lady Seren."

When I lifted my head, Lord Viol was standing right before me.

I felt grateful for him. For his reassuring presence. For his way of blowing all my worries away. And I was secretly grateful he'd attended tonight's ball, too.

Carrying around the earrings he gave me made me feel protected; having him by my side seemed many times more effective.

"Lady Seren, I apologize for the previous incident. Was your foot all right?" Lord Viol questioned me, his face so open and earnest.

Last week, we met and embarked on a beast-subjugation mission together. But he didn't speak of that. Instead, his words seemed designed to implicitly appeal to the surrounding dancers. To make it appear as though the two of us had not met since the occasion of the last dance.

I followed Lord Viol's lead and responded correctly as a lady.

"It is all right. You stepped on my foot but didn't place your weight on it. So please, there is no need for concern."

"Well, I am relieved to hear that."

As if he had already predicted my answer, Lord Viol placed his left hand on his breast and extended his right hand to me. A natural, flowing gesture,

incomparable to the way he'd moved last time.

My eyes naturally followed the motion of Lord Viol's left hand, fixing on the clasp hanging between his collar and lapel.

Yes. The silver clasp I gave him.

I never expected he would wear it to a ball.

I chose it because I wanted it to be the focal point of the jet-black cloak he always wore, but it fit rather well with his tailcoat, which had silver embroidery. It looked made for this tailcoat.

His back was straighter than last time, and he stood tall. He looked so dashing my cheeks grew hot.

I was proud to have given Lord Viol such a nice gift that would enable him to shine all the more.

"I've been practicing hard since then. I promise I won't step on your feet again. Please, would you honor me with another dance?"

At his words, I lifted my head in surprise.

He'd asked me to dance. Again. That fact alone brought up a swell of happiness from the depths of my being.

"...Yes, gladly!"

Coming to my senses, I was swift to accept.

This was probably my last ball. If so, I wanted to dance with Lord Viol just one more time. Oh, I was so filled with gratitude to think that my wish was to come true.

I wouldn't have minded being stepped on at all, but I got the impression Lord Viol wanted to dance beautifully this time. Secretly, I resolved to dance better than I had ever danced myself.

As soon as I took Lord Viol's hand, the music began to play.

As we exchanged glances and took our first steps together, I noticed the change right away.

Lord Viol! You've improved incredibly!

First, his center of gravity no longer wavered. He moved his body smoothly, properly balanced his weight, and held his head steady. And his expression was calm as he danced. Lord Viol must have done an immense amount of training in just one month.

“Is something amiss?” he asked.

“Hmm?”

“It’s just that you look a little surprised.”

Apparently, my face had been telegraphing my thoughts. Even as he spoke, he never missed a step, and I was even more impressed than before. I decided to tell him what I was thinking, frankly.

“I’m surprised you’ve improved so much since last time.”

“Well, I didn’t want a repeat of the foot-stepping incident. I put in significant effort.”

“Your technique has improved dramatically, but I think what’s most impressive is that your core is completely stable. That’s not something that can be improved overnight.”

“Ah, that’s because Count Blaze told me: ‘Beautiful posture is created by the trunk and the physical strength of the body.’ I don’t think I’ve ever applied myself to anything so diligently in my life.”

I knew he wasn’t much for physical activities. It was hard for me to hold back a smile as he gazed seriously at me.

“Lord Viol, you really are a hard worker, aren’t you?”

“Nowhere near as much as you are, Lady Seren. Anyway, I’ve been making excursions outside of town a lot lately. I needed to improve my physical fitness a little, so this was a good opportunity.”

It was true that when we first met, Lord Viol’s skin was so white it was almost transparent in contrast to his jet-black hair and clothes, but now he had a much healthier skin tone.

I’d heard that his work was difficult, but dance practice was tough, too. On top of that, he accompanied me on my beast subjugation excursions. All of that

must have been hard on the body. I felt suddenly uneasy.

“You must be very busy. Is your health all right?” I inquired.

“Of course. I’ve been doing fatigue recovery magic every night, and I’ve become more energetic. My physical strength has been bolstered as well.”

“Oh, that’s good to hear.”

He didn’t seem to be exaggerating; he did have some healthy color in his cheeks. When I gazed up at his beautiful face, it no longer resembled white porcelain but had a healthy glow. His obsidian-like eyes were also full of life and sparkle, and if I let my guard down, I could see myself falling for him.

“By the way, Lady Seren, I received a passing grade on dance fundamentals from Count Blaze, and now I am studying how to use the dance floor in its entirety. I wonder if you’d mind joining me for a spin?”

“Oh my, you really have made a lot of progress.”

“Indeed. I definitely want to show you what I’ve learned. ...But you are wearing a fine, elegant dress. Should I dance more politely? You look so beautiful tonight; perhaps we shouldn’t do anything to spoil the look?”

I looked up at Lord Viol, who spoke quietly as if deliberating with himself, and I smiled.

I appreciated his concern, but this dress was designed to be multifaceted. The reflected hues of other ladies’ dresses would make the fabric of this dress light up gorgeously and serve to highlight it.

And more importantly, I wanted to do that kind of dance myself, too.

At evening balls, I’d only danced with Prince Helios, but he had a very calm, elegant dance style, no doubt because of his position. I had never danced the kind of dance that involves swinging around the dance floor, except during practice sessions.

“No, it looks like a lot of fun. I also want to make use of the entire dance floor,” I said.

“Well, thank you.”

As he spoke, Lord Viol's hands tightened around mine.

The next step was going to be the biggest one I had ever taken. I was filled with excitement.

My spirits soaring with happiness and joy, I took a big step forward, following Lord Viol's lead.

Prince Helios 3

Feelings of Frustration

WHY was this so unpleasant?

Seren and Viol, who'd started dancing together, kept flitting across the corner of my vision; I couldn't concentrate on my own dance.

Just as he said, Archmage Viol had improved. His skill was incomparable to one month ago. His dance form was ideal, and it was easy to recognize the teachings of Count Blaze in it. There was no criticism to give.

He must have been confident, too. Last time, his expression registered hesitancy, but now he looked composed and relaxed. When he spoke to Seren, he seemed calm.

The frigid man was known for disliking others. I'd heard he never interacted with anyone outside of work if he could avoid it. Yet, for some reason, he opened up to Seren. That irritated me tremendously.

Even more irritating was Seren happily chatting with him. I was jealous, I knew, but I had no idea it was such an unpleasant sensation.

I wonder if Seren felt this way every time I danced holding another woman's hands.

It wasn't just Archmage Viol who seemed captivated by her. Here and there, I caught snatches of conversation, gentlemen saying: "Lady Seren is so beautiful tonight, isn't she?" and "You danced with her last time, didn't you? Maybe I'll ask her for a dance tonight, too."

Yes, it was true. Seren had become beautiful of late.

Of course, I noticed it the most as the person closest to her.

Even though my position ought to have allowed me to express my feelings freely to her at any time, ever since I realized that I was attracted to Seren, I hadn't been able to talk to her very well.

At the salon, Seren had started to focus on Marietta's education. If I could support her, it would reduce the burden on her, so I often asked Marietta to do

miscellaneous chores to give her extra experience.

When it came to work, some things were unavoidable, but the reality was that it was hard to engage Seren in conversation now. Whenever I saw her, I became oddly nervous and uncoordinated, and I couldn't help but wonder what she might be thinking.

Until recently, being around her and talking to her was as natural as breathing. But these days, I noticed things, like how much she laughed each day or whether she looked particularly energetic. Who she talked to, and other things I'd never noticed before. I couldn't understand it myself.

Tonight, too, Seren took my breath away by wearing an outfit unlike anything I had seen her wear before. I wanted to praise her beauty, but I fumbled the phrasing.

I blurted out, "Beautiful," but Seren didn't react. The conversation immediately turned to her father's trade business. Thinking back on the conversation dolefully, I realized something.

Had I said the wrong thing?

Seren might have thought I was praising the dress alone since I'd mentioned the dress and her father's business right after calling her beautiful. I'd never said anything like that to Seren before, so I panicked and brought up unnecessary things. I sighed, frustrated with my blunder.

I followed Seren with my eyes. She looked joyful, which was the exact opposite of how I felt. Then I accidentally made eye contact with Viol.

He'd worn a soft expression when talking with Seren, but when our eyes met, Archmage Viol composed his features solemnly and inclined his head slightly. Reluctantly, I returned the pleasantry by inclining my head as well.

This small exchange served as my acknowledgment of Viol's improved dance skills. As much as it frustrated me, I had to admit that he'd improved immeasurably.

Viol's expression didn't change, but I thought I saw a flicker of satisfaction in his eyes. Then he leaned in to whisper something to Seren.

The next moment, Viol's style of leading changed.

With powerful steps and long strides, the two weaved through the crowd away from me. Just as Prime Minister Borden had, he whisked Seren away with a strong lead.

With the two instantly swallowed by the crowd, I lost all sight of them.

When did he become that skilled a dancer?

Navigating a crowd of people while leading a woman is much, much more difficult than just dancing correctly.

I'd heard he was highly skilled at magic, that, since a long time ago, there had been no one able to surpass him. But I'd never expected him to improve his dancing skills this much in just one month.

"Prince Helios?"

A voice addressed me, startling me.

"What are you doing staring into space, when everyone's enjoying the dance?"

"I'm sorry."

Marietta gave me a sad pout.

Of course, she was right. What was I doing? To think of another woman during a dance, and neglect my current partner... What a disrespectful attitude. That should never have happened.

"I'm so sorry. I'm afraid I've had something on my mind. I'll concentrate on our dance now, Marietta. You have my word."

I tightened my arms around Marietta, and she smiled at me.

These balls were important social events for me as the crown prince. In order to fulfill my role properly, I resolved to concentrate only on the girl in front of me.

Viol 16

I Want to Make This the Best Time

I took Lady Seren's hand and braced myself before steadily advancing with a wide stride. The space between the dancers looked strangely like a path, and I guided Lady Seren smoothly along it.

"...Wow!"

Lady Seren's quiet voice expressed her admiration. Joy was in her tone—the same joy she'd shown when she'd successfully used her magic. She was truly happy in this moment with me.

As we proceeded, I secretly deployed my covert magic. I was tired of the intense gazes tracking our every move. No one would think twice if they lost sight of me as I moved through the crowd.

"Hmm. You seem a little out of breath," I noticed. "Is this too much for you?"

"Not at all! It's really fun!" Despite her flushed cheeks and a hint of sweat on her forehead, Lady Seren sounded genuinely happy. "But the dress I'm wearing tonight is made of special material and is quite heavy. Usually, I can move a bit more freely."

She spoke with a slight tone of regret. Lady Seren had a reputation for being a graceful and quiet lady, but she could be quite the tomboy. This way of dancing must've been much more entertaining for her.

"Sorry about that. If you'd said something earlier, I could have assisted sooner."

"...How so?" Lady Seren tilted her head quizzically. Then she looked right up at me and spoke bluntly. "I feel lighter... Lord Viol, did you do something?"

"I lightly increased your muscle strength and recovered your fatigue. Do you

feel more at ease now?”

There hasn't been a spell invented yet to make a dress lighter. I would have to ask that she make do with this.

“Thank you. I feel much more at ease now. Lord Viol, you really do cast magic as easily as breathing, don't you?”

“You could say that. By the way, I cast covert magic, too, so you don't have to worry about people watching.”

“You did?!”

“I cast it just as we were moving through the crowd. It's the usual spell; they're aware someone's there but can't quite place who it is.”

“Goodness... I didn't even notice.”

“In addition, I used a spell to obfuscate our conversations from prying ears. You can discuss secrets with me as much as you want.” I spoke jokingly, but Lady Seren's eyes widened, and she giggled adorably.

“You told me it was dangerous to cast multiple spells at once, but here you are, doing just that,” she said.

“I'm afraid we can't ignore the significant discrepancy in skill level between you and me. But like this, you can dance freely, can you not?”

“Oh, yes! Tonight is to be my last ball, so I was hoping I'd be able to enjoy the experience of dancing with you one more time, Lord Viol.”

That was why she looked so happy and beamed so brightly. I was stunned.

Did Lady Seren intend this to be her last high society event?

Even if she ceased to be a duke's daughter, she could still attend balls as a High Mage. Still, it was probably true that she would become such a source of gossip; it might feel too awkward for her.

Even though time would pass, and I would eventually be able to take her out in public without drawing stares... No doubt Lady Seren would not feel like participating for a while.

“Ah, but the song seems to be over already. ...It's a pity.”

The sad look on Lady Seren's face was almost too much to bear.

I'd heard Lady Seren was always a wallflower at these balls, except when she danced with Prince Helios. *But when she gets the opportunity, it's clear how much this young woman comes alive when dancing and how much she enjoys it.*

Able to keep up with the showiest of steps, she even seemed to enjoy dodging the clumsy footfalls of inept dance partners. In the future, she should enjoy this sort of thing more freely.

All right. I've made up my mind.

I wanted to make this ball, the one she claimed would be her last, the best time she'd ever had.

"Who cares if the song has ended? Nobody is paying any attention to us, anyway," I said.

"Yes... You're right."

"This is going to be your last ball, right? Would you give me your time just for one more song?"

As she gazed up at me, Lady Seren's cheeks were softly dyed vermilion. It was a sudden flush, like the kind brought on by too much alcohol intake. Quickly, I strengthened my grip to steady her. Even if her legs wobbled, I ought to have enough strength to hold her up.

"Are you okay, Lady Seren?"

"Y-Yes...!"

"Do you need to take a rest?"

"No! I'm...fine. I was just so thrilled, I... I would like to dance with you as well, Lord Viol..." She spoke as if embarrassed, and I wondered if she was bashful.

As a new song struck up and we leaned into one another, I felt Lady Seren's heart beating rapidly. It made me restless.

I'd been thinking of dancing boldly and sweeping her around the floor like before, but she looked so adorable blushing in my arms. I continued with gentle steps, holding her lightly against me.

Lady Seren might have preferred dances with more movement, but I couldn't bring myself to change up my steps. This moment felt too precious.

"Lady Seren..." I whispered in her ear, wanting her permission to continue dancing slowly like this. But there was no response.

Her amber eyes looked straight up at me, and I felt the illusion that time had stopped. I stared at her, speechless, for a while.

How long had we been staring at each other?

After finally regaining my composure, I noticed that Lady Seren's cheeks were redder than before. And they were only getting redder.

Her eyes glistened. Her breath was hot. Her lashes trembled. She went limp in my arms. I'd never seen Lady Seren like this before.

"Are you okay...?"

Concerned, I spoke to her, and Lady Seren lowered her brows, muttering. "I can't..."

At that moment, she began to droop backward.

"Woah."

I was holding her firmly, so there was no need to worry, but to relieve the strain on her, I wrapped her whole body with a wall of soft air to support her.

"I feel... I feel hot," she muttered.

Enthusiastic dancers filled the ballroom. Until recently, Lady Seren had mainly only danced with Prince Helios in a wide space, with plenty of room around her. She no doubt had little experience dancing in such a crowded place. No wonder she overheated.

I was so excited by the opportunity to dance with her that I neglected to care for her health. Apparently, I had a long way to go as a man.

"The night breeze might help. Do you mind if we go out on the balcony?" I suggested.

"Oh, yes, please."

"All right, come with me."

Mentally castigating myself, I supported an unsteady Lady Seren as I led her to the almost deserted balcony.

Since the ball had just started, hardly anyone was on the balcony. Even though she couldn't be identified due to the covert spell, Lady Seren might be uncomfortable in the presence of others. I was relieved we had some privacy.

A gentle wind blew over Lady Seren as she slumped back against a bench, swooning. The air was chilly, and it must have felt good. I hoped she'd be revived soon.

I gazed at her, concerned. Her eyes were downcast, and her flushed cheeks and the breath between her lips had a sensual quality. I couldn't take my eyes off her and felt suddenly excited.

I knew this wasn't good, but I couldn't look away from that charming face and that white, dewy neck.

Her amber hair was loosely curled in an updo, accentuating her dainty nape, and the way the wind made the loose curls sway and caress that slender neck was most vexing.

I was seeing something I ought not to see, so I averted my eyes, but now I was looking at her bosom, rising and falling with her shallow breathing.

Good lord, I wasn't sure where to put my eyes. But at the same time, I couldn't tear them away.

I wanted to wrap her in my arms so no one else could look at her and hold her tight.

As that outrageous thought crossed my mind, I wanted to punch myself.

She was sick! She had come to cool off! What was I thinking? My heart, which should have been concerned for her, was distracted by my desires and emotions.

Well, I am a man, after all. I suppose I can't help it.

I had never been interested in anyone before, so I was confused. No doubt, this sort of feeling was normal. If Borden knew of it, he'd probably be most impressed, crying out, "Finally, the ice mage acts like a real man...!"

But Lady Seren trusted me and respected me as her mentor. If she knew of my outrageous thoughts, how could she fail to be disillusioned with me?

Be pure of heart! Pure of heart!

Trying not to let my eyes rest on any one place, I concentrated on ensuring she had a good flow of cold, crisp outside air.

“...Thank you, Lord Viol. I believe I’ve recovered well enough.”

Hearing Lady Seren declare herself well again, I came to my senses. The song playing in the ballroom was the same as when we left. Goodness, barely any time had actually gone by at all.

“You recovered surprisingly quickly,” I said.

“That’s because I was able to take in the cool night breeze. You conjured it to flow toward me, didn’t you? Thank you.”

“You noticed.”

When my eyes widened in surprise, Lady Seren displayed her usual carefree smile.

“The flowers on the balcony weren’t swaying. The breeze seemed to be blowing only over me. Of course, I noticed.”

“I see. You noticed correctly.”

“And anyway, it’s not that I was feeling *sick*...” she spoke in a small, vanishing voice, and I tilted my head quizzically.

“But you were faint, were you not?”

“That was... Erm... Anyway, I’m all right now. See? Not even dizzy!”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it, but... Don’t go overdoing things, all right?”

She stood steady and erect. It was as if the vapors of a few moments ago had never even occurred.

But this way was better for me. Being alone with Lady Seren on this dimly lit balcony, I was afraid I might start having unethical thoughts again.

“Then, would you like to dance a little more? This song will probably end

soon, but if you take light steps, as you did earlier, you shouldn't strain yourself too much."

"No!" she yelped, flustered, and I wondered if she was saying she was not ready to dance again, but her next words surprised me. "Let's use the entire dance floor again, as we did before."

"Hey, are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Actually, it was the closeness that had such an effect on me. I was blushing so much I thought I might explode..."

"The closeness?"

It's normal to get physically close when you dance with a partner.

Confused, I took Lady Seren's hand and drew her out of the shadows to see her face and check her color, but she reddened.

"Too close!!!" she cried.

"I... I apologize."

I apologized immediately, but I couldn't understand it. This level of physical closeness between us seemed normal. In fact, Lady Seren was always rubbing my cheeks and stroking me all over... Then I froze, realizing.

Those were memories from my cat form!

Right. ...Right.

Of course, this was not acceptable. I was no Vi. I should have kept a more respectable distance. One day, I could see myself making a huge mistake, mixing my memories of being Vi with being Viol.

I would have to be more careful with my behavior in the future. Reflecting on my actions, I lowered my head before Lady Seren.

"I am so sorry. Did I make you uncomfortable?"

"No, um, it's not like I hated it or anything. It's just that I felt quite embarrassed."

Lady Seren seemed flustered to receive my apology, but she was most gracious. Still, I couldn't take advantage of Lady Seren's innate kindness.

“I’m sorry. I will maintain a moderate sense of distance from now on.”

“Th-Thank you...”

Lady Seren lowered her eyes and looked uncomfortable.

I’ve often been told I look angry, so maybe she thought I was offended by what she said. But it was entirely my fault, so there was no reason why she should be feeling uncomfortable.

She seemed about to speak, but after hesitating, she closed her mouth. I spoke to her as gently as I could.

“What would you like to do? Would you like to opt out of further dancing?”

“No! ...I mean... I really want to dance with you, Lord Viol.”

I’d only suggested it because I didn’t want her to push herself too much, but Lady Seren lifted her head and rebuffed me vigorously and adorably.

“I mean, this may be the last dance.”

She said it with such a sad look, and I couldn’t help it if my spirits soared.

“Then let us go. If we don’t hurry, the song will end.”

“All right!”

I reached out my hand, and she gladly took it. My spirits still soaring, I led Lady Seren back into the splendid ballroom.

The moment she entered the ballroom, Lady Seren’s dress was illuminated in bright colors, reflecting the dresses of the surrounding ladies. It was a small shame that I was the only one who could appreciate this splendid view. At the same time, though, I wanted to have it all to myself for a little longer.

Lady Seren wanted to dance in such a way as to make use of the entire ballroom floor.

Quite a crowd was on the dance floor, but it was still possible to move around. I tried to make eye contact with Lady Seren to indicate where I was heading, but for some reason, she didn’t look at me.

Even during turns or when she changed the orientation of her head, she made an effort not to look me in the face. Ah, I was troubled.

“Lady Seren.”

“Yes?”

Even though she replied, Lady Seren kept looking away. She wouldn't even look at me for a brief second.

“I think I'm keeping an appropriate distance when dancing.”

“Yes, it's perfect.”

Then why? I felt somehow... Desolate.

“Since we're dancing together, would you mind facing me a little?”

“Impossible.”

“I want to see your face.”

“...! Im... Impossible...!” she sputtered.

Even though we weren't face to face, her neck and ears had still gone red.

Huh? But why? While I puzzled over it, Lady Seren's hand slipped from mine.

“I don't think I can do this anymore tonight, after all...!” she announced.

Letting go of my hand, Lady Seren ran through the crowd, her face red. Lifting the skirts of her dress and dashing through the hall, she ought to have attracted attention, but thanks to my recognition-inhibiting spell, no one would recall having seen this later on. So, I supposed there was no real issue.

She had parted from me of her own will. No doubt she would not appreciate it if I was too persistent.

Worried she might trip and fall, I ran after her but decided against calling out to her. Instead, I kept her in sight.

She seemed to be drinking some cool water now to quench her parched throat. She fanned herself rapidly with her fan, but mercifully, she did not seem on the verge of another swoon. Relieved, I picked up a drink, too, and moved over to the wall.

When the timing was right, I would probably have to remove the recognition-inhibiting spell cast on her.

But that blush on her cheeks... It wasn't normal.

She said she was embarrassed to make eye contact with me. Could it be? Was Lady Seren aware of me, not as her tutor, but as a member of the opposite sex?

Thinking about it was exhilarating.

If Lady Seren had developed romantic feelings for me... Then I wanted to be sure of it. I wanted to close the distance between us more. I was swelling with those sorts of desires. But I swiftly put a lid on those feelings.

The entry deadline for the exam was the twentieth day of Breezeber. Only three weeks left.

The time had come to test the results of her training over the past two months.

The first priority was to make her wishes come true. And...if possible, I wanted to help her and make it so she didn't have to throw away all the relationships she'd cultivated throughout her life thus far.

I may be pretty ignorant about human relationships, but surely there has to be something even I can do.

That's what I was thinking as Lady Seren spotted me over by the wall and burst into a lovely blush again.



"HEY Vi, are you listening?"

I closed my eyes tightly, Lady Seren's face inches from mine.

And just yesterday, she'd gotten angry at me for getting too close! Well, was *she* not extremely close to me now?

The day after the ball, I visited Lady Seren's room in cat form and was met with such torture that it made me want to close my eyes and ears.

"And then Lord Viol conjured a breeze to flow over me! If I hadn't learned magic, I wouldn't have noticed that the breeze was a sign of Lord Viol's kindness. He is such a gentleman to subtly show such care for another person, in a way that won't cause them any discomfort!"

Lady Seren's compliment was too much. I couldn't help pressing my black ears down flat with my forepaws.

She had been continuing in this vein for some time.

It was clear when I entered the room that Lady Seren was dying to speak of something. But the main priority right now was to get Lady Seren capable of subjugating mid-rank magical beasts with mid-level magic.

With that in mind, I insisted on the usual training session. But after it was over, it was teatime.

As if she'd been waiting for this, Lady Seren gushed in great detail about how I'd been yesterday, how kind and cool I was, and how she couldn't keep herself from blushing.

If my face wasn't covered in black fur, I'd be bright red, a sight I couldn't allow Lady Seren to see.

I was pleased to receive her praise, but it was horribly embarrassing.

"Please, no more..." I groaned.

"Oh, Vi, whatever's the matter?"

"It embarrasses me to hear all this about the master's ballroom exploits. Please, can you wrap it up?"

I ended up speaking more frankly than I'd intended, and Lady Seren blinked as if she'd just remembered something, grinning.

"Hehe, now I recall how you once told me that you don't like hearing people openly compliment your master to your face. Your tail was flapping about as it is now, I believe."

Now that she'd pointed it out, I noticed it too. It was true my feelings of embarrassment and awkwardness seemed to be telegraphed by this treacherous tail. *Whap! Whap!* The tail slapped the surface of the table.

Yes, the movements of the tail struck me as familiar.

Whenever I'm under duress, the tail seems to move on its own.

"You're so cute, Vi, getting embarrassed when someone praises your master."

Now she started cooing over Cat Me, crooning about how cute I was. This was even worse!

Ah, and here it comes!

Lady Seren's graceful hand gently caressed me, from my head down to my back, then tickled my chin and chest.

Yikes! It feels incredible!

Whenever this happened, my brain slowed down. Lady Seren's fondling grew more delicious with each passing day. Desperately resisting the urge to give myself over to her, I voiced a thought I'd had in mind for a while.

"Lady Seren, wasn't there a salon session today? How is that going?"

I brought up the salon to change the subject, and Lady Seren thought for a moment before responding.

"Oh, yes, well, Lady Linde and Lady Ladia want to become civil servants, and the seniors have heaped praise upon them for the way they've absorbed the tutelage they've been receiving."

"Is that so? Well, I'd expect no less."

She paused in her stroking, distracted.

At that moment, I slipped from under Lady Seren's hand and slipped my tongue into my own luxurious water bowl. My throat was parched from embarrassment.

Ah, delicious water. So calming.

"And even Marietta was studying hard with her home tutor right up until the ball yesterday evening," she continued. "She's really working hard. She's even learned a few work tasks that she can do by herself. From next week, I think I'll be able to return to attending salons at the same pace I did before."

"Hmm. Well, that's good, isn't it?"

"Only..." Muttering, Lady Seren put a finger to her lips, slightly averting her gaze. "Marietta seemed a little lackluster today. I have the feeling she was smiling less than she usually does. Yesterday, she studied hard, and then there

was the ball. I thought she might be tired, so I cast a fatigue recovery spell, but...”

“Well, it’s to be expected. Balls *are* tiring.”

“I wonder if Lord Viol is tired, too? I hope I didn’t cause him any inconvenience?” she fretted.

“Not at all. Dancing with you was so much fun, Lady Seren. There’s no way I— He would be tired.”

Lady Seren worried all of a sudden, so I quickly reassured her. Strangely, I had enjoyed myself. The balls and socializing I’d hated before seemed so fun with Lady Seren. I didn’t want her to get the wrong impression.

“My master simply doesn’t like places with many people.”

“Well, I hope you’re right about that.”

“He’s fine, I assure you. And as for your sister... As long as she doesn’t seem visibly depressed, I think all you need to do is keep an eye on her for a while. But don’t worry too much about it.”

“Yes, I am worried... But I’ll hang back and observe her.”

Lady Seren smiled gently, and I nodded with empathy.

Yes, that would be best. I understood Lady Seren was fond of her little sister, but for the moment, I wanted her to focus on her own journey. Sincerely.

Marietta 2

What a Cowardly, Unpleasant Girl I Am

“I’M so sorry.” Prince Helios’s purple eyes finally looked at me. “I’m afraid I’ve had something on my mind.”

He didn’t have to say it. *Something on his mind... My sister, no?*

That stone statue of a man... The frosty Archmage of the Third Mage Guild. He’d taken her away, whisked her to the far side of the ballroom. Much as I hated it, I could tell she was on his mind as Prince Helios followed the pair of them with his eyes.

That stone statue of a man. What was his deal?

How could he have become that skilled a dancer in just one month? And his expression, so challenging as he’d stared back at Prince Helios. Please, strange man, do not disturb Prince Helios’s heart more than you already have.

“I’ll concentrate on our dance now, Marietta. You have my word.”

As he spoke, Prince Helios smiled as he usually did, but I knew it was not his usual smile. Because Prince Helios was so captivated by my sister, he could barely even converse with me. I saw it with my own eyes only moments earlier.

Until now, he had addressed everyone the same way, with the same smile and the same tone—a perfect gentleman.

I knew that he didn’t have any special feelings for me, but at least I was able to comfort myself that Prince Helios didn’t have those kinds of feelings for anyone else. But... No longer.

This was for the best. I should have been happy for my sister. But my heart was bursting with pain, and I found it impossible to enjoy the ball that evening.



“Haaa...”

A sigh escaped me. After all, my sister would be absent tomorrow and the day after.

She came to the salon every day last week to help me acclimate, but usually, of the four weekdays, she would only attend for two mornings.

Going to the salon without her made my heart heavy for a specific reason.

Because I always thought that my sister was special.

Since she was a child, she was thoroughly educated to become the future queen. She went without sleep or recreation to meet everyone’s expectations of her. That was how she’d gotten to where she was today. I knew that.

Until now, she was always there to cover for me when I couldn’t handle something.

My sister was someone special. A future queen.

So, if I couldn’t match her pace, well, so what?

But I had no idea that Lady Linde and Lady Ladia would be so perfect... I mean, they absorbed the difficult salon conversations like sand soaking up water and seemed to understand everything fully.

Of course, they were still far behind my sister and the salon seniors, but there was a clear discrepancy between me and them. I could only understand half the words spoken in the salon.

“Originally, I wanted to become a civil official. In addition to studying at the academy, I’m always consciously acquiring as much knowledge as a civil official needs to know.”

“I’m far behind Lady Linde, but I, too, have studied the basics. I was allowed to study so I could help my future husband manage our territory.”

When Lady Linde spoke so casually, Lady Ladia returned it with an impregnable smile.

“Commoners get their knowledge from the reference room at the academy. I, too, acquired half of my knowledge from the reference room.”

Lady Ladia's words seemed to imply: "Why didn't you ever want to try studying by yourself?" Well, she had a point.

I'd asked my sister to teach me in-depth, and I decided to ask my father and mother if I might have a tutor on my days off, but I couldn't catch up with the others that easily.

Even today, my sister and Prince Helios went through great pains to explain things to me, but they had to rephrase themselves several times, and even then, I could barely understand.

It felt like my brain was about to explode. It was the first time I'd ever studied so hard. I wondered if my sister had been doing this since she was a child.

"Thank you for your hard work. You did a great job today."

On the carriage ride home, I heard a gentle voice and raised my head to see my sister smiling like the holy mother.

"Me?"

I couldn't help sighing. I mean, I can't work hard like my sister does. I can't concentrate in that manner.

"Come to think of it, I happened to meet Master Ventoux today. Master Ventoux is your new tutor, right? He was very open in his praise, not like during his old lectures. He seemed happy that you're so attentive to his teachings and that you're so open to learning."

I rolled my eyes.

"Oh, don't pout. Not with that angel face of yours."

Wrapping her hand around mine and stroking my hair gently as she did when I was small, my sister smiled at me.

"It's okay, Marietta," she said sweetly. "You're making progress every day. You don't have to rush."

Please don't be so kind to me. I'm a cowardly, unpleasant girl. I hate myself. I'm a girl who doesn't deserve to be treated kindly by my sister.

On the day of the ball, even today... Though I know Prince Helios is taken by

Seren, to the point where he becomes nervous and can't make normal conversation...I do nothing to help him.

I could advise Prince Helios. I could tell my sister about Prince Helios's feelings. The odd sense of distance between the two would surely disappear instantly, and they could relax and laugh easily together... But I couldn't bring myself to do it.

I'm so sorry, Seren. I think I'm in love with Prince Helios, after all.

I like his face and figure, of course, but what I love most is his diligent effort and the way he's secretly awkward despite striving to appear perfect. I love him so much that I can hardly stand it.

I thought if my sister fell in love with someone else, I could take my chance and do everything to attract the attention of Prince Helios, who never seemed to show interest in any woman.

But now...

Even though I know that Prince Helios likes my sister, I still want to steal him. I even hoped that my sister would misunderstand Prince Helios's awkward attitude.

I can't even do my job at the salon right. And I can't even support the happiness of my sister, who is so kind to me, or the happiness of my beloved Prince Helios.

I can see my ugliness, and I hate it. I hate myself.

Even so...

Ignoring the tears that spilled forth, I looked up at my sister.

I'm sorry, Seren. But I'm not going to stop.

Seren 18

Recording Orbs Are So Embarrassing

“**MY** heart is racing...!”

With the forest in front of me, I couldn't hide my nerves.

Yesterday, Vi announced, “My master has said tomorrow you will go deep into the forest. That's where the mid-ranking magical beasts tend to appear.”

Last night, I visualized the potential battle right up until the last minute and read books on magical beasts, but the thought of having to fight a mid-ranking magical beast for the first time made me quake inside.

The mid-ranking magical beasts I saw in the magical beast encyclopedia had stats comparable to ten single low-ranking magical beasts. They're physically bigger, too, and have many more abilities.

Low-ranking magical beasts were small animals humans could challenge, but mid-ranking magical beasts were ferocious and belligerent. Unless you've got solid fighting skills, an encounter with one of them could end in death.

...Would I really be able to fight one?

The ferocious-looking magical beasts I'd seen in the book popped up, one after another, in my head, and I couldn't help but tremble.

“All right. Let's go.”

“Okay!” I responded to Lord Viol as resolutely as I could.

No matter how scared I might have been, there was no running away. Today included, I had only about three more chances to get this done, and Lord Viol had spared his own busy time for me. Giving up simply because I felt scared was out of the question.

“Lady Seren.”

“Yes?”

Lord Viol turned from where he walked slightly ahead of me and stared at my face. Then he gave me a slight smile.

“...Don’t worry so much.”

Lord Viol’s smiles were bad for my heart. Until a few moments ago, my heart had been pounding with fear over the prospect of facing a mid-ranking magical beast. Now, it was pounding for a different reason.

“There’s still time until we reach the point where mid-ranking magical beasts appear. Let’s warm up by subjugating some low-ranking magical beasts.”

“Okay... I’ll do my best.”

“Oh, right. You should wear this.”

Lord Viol produced a sturdy-looking pendant necklace. The chain was thick and strongly made, unlikely to break even during a tough fight.

“Could this be a Recording Orb? I expected to need one next time, so I planned to ask where I might purchase one.”

“They’re reusable, so I’ll lend you mine. The way it works is that it will start recording when you cast magic upon it and continue recording until you cast magic upon it again.”

“Thank you very much! In that case, I suppose I can easily use yours.”

“You can overwrite it as much as you like, so it’s a good idea to record yourself each time you fight a mid-ranking beast. I brought several so you can save a few good ones, and we can review them later.”

“Goodness, thank you so much!”

“Well, let’s just see how today goes. I figured I should bring some just in case.”

Lord Viol showed me a handful of Recording Orbs, his expression casual. I was impressed by his foresight.

I couldn’t give in to fear. In order to pay back Lord Viol’s kindness, I would absolutely defeat a mid-ranking magical beast with mid-level magic and become a High Mage!

I put the pendant he’d handed me around my neck and made a little declaration to myself as I clutched the Orb.

“Oh, it looks like you’re fired up. That’s the spirit.”

Lord Viol’s gaze softened. Even that subtle change made my heart react, and my temperature rose. Trying to ignore it, I gazed into the forest depths.

“All right, let’s go. Lady Seren, you should take point from here. And don’t forget to cast your barrier wall.” Lord Viol urged me on, his voice soft and gentle. I swallowed hard and stepped into the forest.

My protective wall was thick and strong enough to protect against even a sudden wolf attack. It should be adequate. But even with plenty of magical power, I might fight a mid-ranking magical beast today, so I didn’t want to spend too much of my magical power.

The entrance to the forest, where people often enter, was still bright, with various vegetation. Many of the shrubs and undergrowth were brightly colored, and it was hard to feel too frightened at this stage.

I would be fine.

Surely, it would all be fine.

As I tried to persuade myself of that, I scanned the area for the magical energy of the beasts that Lord Viol had told me of before.

He said it was a stinging magical power that felt almost prickly.

I still wasn’t good at discerning magical power, so even though I concentrated, I couldn’t pick up on anything. At times like this, I envied people like Lord Riesz, who were good at discerning magic. I’d thought about asking him for some pointers, but I couldn’t come up with a good excuse as to why I wanted to be able to identify magical powers, so I gave up on the idea.

I wonder if it would have been better if I had learned.

Regretting my lack of preparedness, I proceeded forward while paying attention to my surroundings. Even if I couldn’t sense the magical power, there might still be something I could discern with my eyes, ears, or nose.

Then I heard a faint sound, like someone stepping on grass. Someone who wasn’t us. I concentrated on the direction of the sound, desperately scanning for any signs. But with my scant experience, I couldn’t discern whether a beast

was there or not.

Can't I pick up on the magical energy just a little? I've sensed it before, barely, so it might be possible.

As I searched for traces of magical energy, I felt a sharp, prickling sensation.

Something was there.

This prickling magical energy. It had to be a magical beast.

Dense shrubbery covered the area where the energy was concentrated; I couldn't get a visual of the potential magical beast. With my skill level, I couldn't discern how many or what type of beasts were there, but at least I could avoid a surprise attack.

Ruminating on the points Lord Viol had raised during my last subjugation mission, I gazed alertly at where the magical beast was.

Last time, instead of blocking the magical beast's attack with a protective barrier wall spell, I repelled it with a wall of pure wind. Lord Viol evaluated this action highly, saying that it was effective as it enabled me to do damage to the magical beasts without letting them get close to me.

Then, I predicted the enemy's movements without too much extraneous movement, hoisted multiple enemies into the air with my wind control, and blocked off their means of escape before killing them. But I lost points for not using mid-level magic and slumping to the ground after the battle.

I'd been concocting a plan to get those extra points I'd lost last time. Lord Viol said if I wanted more points, I should use the surrounding area to my advantage. So, I'd been thinking of several things I could do with that.

It will be fine. Surely, it will all be fine.

Even as I told myself that, something huge jumped out of the shrubbery where I'd predicted the monster was.

A silent cry escaped my lips.

With the force of a speeding bullet, a huge brown mass rushed at me, and I screamed despite myself. I threw up a wall of wind, and the creature smashed into it.

The shattering of the wall took my breath away.

I hastily deployed a new wall, double the thickness. At the same time, I covered my ears and strengthened my barrier wall. If the giant could hit with that much force, even my barrier wall might not hold if it broke through.

There was a dull sound of impact, and then a cloud of dust billowed up from the other side of my wall of wind.

The Wind Wall shook violently with a terrible sound.

Faced with the overwhelming power of this monster, the likes of which I'd never encountered, I couldn't keep my legs from trembling. I'd never seen a Wind Wall shatter or bend like that.

Terrified, I wanted to look at Lord Viol's face, but I suppressed the urge and increased the thickness of my Wind Wall instead.

The dust that had kicked up began to settle, and I saw the entire massive magical beast for the first time.

"A Great Boar..." I muttered.

A magical beast I'd seen in the encyclopedia of magical beasts. A large and ferocious boar—characterized by its rushing power, huge body, and sharp fangs. The description stated the fur was also tough, making it difficult for a sword to pass through.

Even though it was big and scary, it was still, unbelievably, a low-ranking magical beast.

Irritated by the unbroken wall of wind, the Great Boar rammed its body against it over and over. Desperately enduring the roaring noise it made, I thought hard.

Calm down. Calm down.

This was my chance. If I struck now while it was busy ramming against the wall, I might have a better chance of hurting it.

Taking a few deep breaths, I built up my magical power.

Actually, this was ideal. Originally, I was determined to try the intermediate

magic spell known as Wind Bomb today, and that just so happened to be the most suitable spell for this situation.

Wind Bomb was a spell that caused a hard cluster of wind to land in the enemy's vicinity. Then, it released Wind Cutter blades from within the cluster. So, if I lobbed Wind Bomb over my Wind Wall, I should be able to attack the Great Boar efficiently.

That was my plan, but perhaps out of fear or impatience, I couldn't control my magic effectively.

Of course, when controlling mid-level magic, the amount of magical power I must control is greater. My ability to concentrate would affect the magical technique's implementation.

"Lady Seren."

"Yes?"

Hearing Lord Viol's voice, I instinctively turned around.

"Why not try using the Recording Orb?"

"Oh... Yes, of course."

Not good. I was overwhelmed by the power of the Great Boar and forgot to send magic to activate the Recording Orb. Lord Viol was right. I had to get used to handling the Orbs to get an idea of the footage they captured.

Eyes locked on the Great Boar, I sent my magical energy to the Recording Orb.

The Recording Orb flickered, glowing white. Did this mean it was recording? I snuck a glance at Lord Viol, who nodded.

Good. All right.

Seeing Lord Viol's face reassured me. I had the feeling I'd be able to cast Wind Bomb now.

I concentrated my magical power into my hands, and the power accumulated in a way it hadn't before. The Wind Bomb, a cluster of tightly packed wind blades, vibrated in my hands, producing a rumbling sound. I waited for the right moment to launch it.

It seemed as powerful as it was when I was practicing in my room...!

Aiming at the Great Boar, who continued to hit the Wind Wall violently, I threw the Wind Bomb over the Wind Wall.

The moment the Wind Bomb hit the ground, I released my control over it and let it explode. At this angle, even against a Great Boar with its tough exterior, the blades should've hit the soft part of the stomach.

Please. Please be effective.

The sound of blades snapping and ripping through flesh and the terrifying scream of the Great Boar echoed through the forest.



“LADY Seren, you look pleased with yourself.”

“I do?”

When I turned around and looked up, Lord Viol’s face softened into a smile.

Indeed, I was a little overwhelmed. Because Lord Viol had just given me a great deal of praise regarding the battle.

“Is it that obvious?” I asked.

“You’re practically floating. But that battle was spectacular.”

How embarrassing... How childish to look visibly happy after a battle!

Even though I could control myself properly at social gatherings, the academy, and the salon, I wondered why I blushed so easily, and let my social mask slip so much around Lord Viol. It was true that Lord Viol was a reliable teacher, so perhaps that was why I was a little self-indulgent around him.

Truthfully, there were other reasons why I blushed so much and acted so strangely around him. But I wanted the relief of self-deception.

“By the way, Lady Seren, did you send your magic to the Recording Orb after the battle?”

“Oh! No, I forgot.”

“I see. Then you must still be recording. If you don’t send your magic power to

it again, it will keep recording forever.”

“It’s still recording?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, dear! I’ll deactivate it at once.”

Certainly, Lord Viol had explained that once magic was sent to the Orb, it would continue recording until the next time magic was sent to it. I was embarrassed that it was still recording; I had forgotten to deactivate it.

Looking down at my bosom, the Recording Orb still glowed faintly white. I grabbed it and sent my magic power to it, whereupon the light flickered and disappeared.

Did that deactivate the recording?

“Lady Seren, let me show you how to view the recording.”

“Oh, yes. Please do.”

I removed the Recording Orb pendant from my neck and handed it to Lord Viol, who produced something like a small round lens from thin air.

“If you put this in contact with the Recording Orb and pass magic power through it, the recording will be played back.”

Lord Viol attached the lens-like object to the Recording Orb and passed his magic power through it. An image appeared, projected in the air.

A close-up Wind Bomb appeared. I knew it was a recording, but it was still terrifying. And I was a little surprised to see my trembling hands desperately controlling the bomb.

Was this... Was this seen from the perspective of my own eyes?

It looked as though it was from my perspective as I looked down at the Wind Bomb in my hand. It didn’t seem to have been captured from the position of a dangling pendant Recording Orb at all.

While I was thinking that, the Wind Bomb, which seemed ready to fly forth from my hands at any second, suddenly shrunk.

Ah, that was because it was flying toward the Great Boar.

As the realization hit me, I could clearly see the Wind Bomb flying over the Wind Wall and exploding right next to the Great Boar's hulking body.

With a number of blades embedded in its stomach, the Great Boar fell with a dull thump, a cloud of dust rising. The Orb recorded its death throes faithfully, and I relived the final moments of the battle once more.

Strange how the Great Boar looked so sharp and detailed while the surroundings were blurry.

"I... I defeated it!" My excited voice echoed, and the field of view suddenly swung around.

"Yes. Great job."

I seemed to have turned around. Now the Orb showed Lord Viol's gentle face. The corners of his mouth were slightly raised, and his eyes crinkled warmly... My favorite of Lord Viol's expressions.

He was so cool!

Even though I knew it was a recording, I couldn't help but admire Lord Viol's expression again.

It was a close-up, so I could see his features more clearly than the real Lord Viol. Without thinking, I clasped my hands in front of my chest and allowed myself to swoon a little.

After enjoying the magnified smile of Lord Viol for a few moments, he blushed and averted his eyes.

Ah, he looks splendid like that, too. His black hair fell softly on his cheeks. It made my heart pound. I thought the same thing a few moments ago when I saw this scene for real. Looking back on it like this, I realized I'd been staring at Lord Viol.

I felt guilty. Shooting the real Lord Viol an apologetic look, he averted his eyes, much like the Lord Viol in the Recording Orb.

Even so, he still held the Recording Orb steady in his hands so as to clearly project the recording.

"I can't stand it when my face and voice appear in recordings..." When he

muttered that softly, I grew embarrassed, too.

If it were ever known how captivated by him I am, I would be beyond embarrassed. I'd simply die!

And right after defeating the monster, too! I would have to stop this recording immediately!

As the heat concentrated in my cheeks, I made up my mind.

"Ah, ah, ah, um...! To stop it, should I just put my magic power into it again?"

"That's right. Like this."

The playback stopped, and I breathed a sigh of relief. If this recording was proof of my "take" on the previous battle scene, I dreaded to think what the recording would show after, when Lord Viol praised my performance. If it were obvious that I had eyes only for Lord Viol, then he would surely be disgusted with me. *Recording Orbs are frightening things.*

"If you activate it with your power again, you can view the continuation," he said. "And if you send your magic power twice in quick succession, you can view it again from the beginning. Well, it takes some getting used to."

"May I try?"

"Oh, of course."

I wrapped the Recording Orb he handed me in both hands and quickly sent two bursts of magic power to it. The recording went back to the beginning, with the Wind Bomb building up in power. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The danger of viewing the continuation of the earlier scene was now gone.

"You're good at that," he praised.

"By the way, is there a way to erase it?"

"There's no way to just erase it. If you want to erase the previous record, even just a small section, you have to record over it with a new event."

"I see," I said, nodding and staring at the Recording Orb. Embarrassment made me want to erase it, but part of me also wanted to view it again. Perhaps in private.

No, it might be safer to erase it, after all. I dreaded the thought that a third party might view this footage.

“Um, you were able to make the recording play with your power, Lord Viol. Does this mean that anyone could view this Orb if they activated it magically?”

“Yes, that’s how this kind of Recording Orb works. It was developed for use in the High Mage exam, so it was made so that anyone could play it.”

“There are different types?”

“Yes. There is a lot of demand for Recording Orbs. Even in the Third Mage Guild, we are developing prototypes for different applications.”

“Goodness...!”

I couldn’t help but gasp in admiration.

The Third Mage Guild’s most important role was to maintain this country’s magic barrier, but it was also responsible for subjugating magical beasts when abnormalities occurred, as well as developing magical devices and new forms of magic.

“Some Recording Orbs can only be played by the person who recorded them, and there’s another kind that can only be recorded or played back by certain people who’ve registered their magical powers. Those are a little expensive, though. But different Orbs are for different requirements.”

“Speaking of which, I feel like the Recording Orb was recording the scene as I saw it, but are there orbs that record from different perspectives?”

“Yes, some only record a certain direction relative to the Orb. Those are convenient for recording meetings and the like.”

I knew it! I’ll have to get one of those for next time.

Or so I thought, but what Lord Viol had to say next changed my mind.

“The Recording Orb you used was developed by our mages for evaluation purposes pertaining to the High Mage exam. It records everything seen through the eyes of the person who activates the Orb with their magic.”

“Oh, it’s for the evaluation?” I asked.

“By recording the person’s point of view, it’s possible to clearly convey to the scorer their level of attention, the breadth of their field of awareness, and the overall situation seen from the user’s POV. Thus, the individual’s battle choices can be ascertained and assessed accordingly. Actually, I feel it’s an invention to be proud of.”

Pride tinged Lord Viol’s voice. From the things we’d discussed so far, I knew Lord Viol wasn’t the type to exaggerate or act overly humble when discussing his feelings and evaluations.

I’m sure he was really proud that he’d developed such wonderful technology.

“The High Mages are all truly amazing people,” I said.

“Ah, yes, I am proud of my subordinates.”

Lord Viol smiled, looking genuinely happy. If I could pass the exam and become a High Mage myself, maybe the day would come when he might be proud of my achievements and describe me as a subordinate he was proud of.

A fresh fighting spirit welled up inside me at the thought.

“Lady Seren, swap. You should use this one for the next fight.”

At his prompting, I put on the new Recording Orb and handed the old one to Lord Viol. He put a single knot in the chain and then stashed it in his waist bag.

“For exams in particular, it’s best to prepare several Recording Orbs and store them in order of priority; then you can compare them and select the best recording.”

“I see.”

“By reviewing the footage objectively, you can pick up on wasted energy expended during battles and even brainstorm new tactics.”

“So they’re useful for performance review, too,” I mused.

“Indeed. I’ve brought three Recording Orbs this time, so we can bring back a maximum of three combat records. Record each fight, and then we can carefully select the best later.”

“Even if we don’t capture footage worth submitting, it could still be useful to

have a record for personal review, huh?”

“Yes. Although, it may be difficult to record for submission today. ...But for now, please make an effort to reliably record every battle,” he instructed. “If you don’t have a recording, no matter how many big enemies you defeat, it won’t count to the examiner, so don’t forget to record your work.”

“Understood.”

The realization that I was finally in the final stages of preparations for the High Mage’s exam made me clench my fist around the new Recording Orb.

Proceeding further into the forest meant possibly facing off against a monster even bigger and more ferocious than that Great Boar, which had been as tall as I was. When that happened, I’d need to make sure not to panic.

Fortunately, today had already gotten off to a good start.

As soon as I sense the presence of another beast, I must send magical energy to the Recording Orb and enter a battle stance immediately. Reminding myself of that, I proceeded deeper into the forest.

Viol 17

This is a Trial

GRIPPING the Recording Orb with a stern expression, Lady Seren turned around and advanced into the depths of the forest.

I secretly exhaled a long breath while following her.

Goodness, my heart was pounding. What I'd seen on the Recording Orb flashed through my mind. Embarrassment welled up inside my chest again.

To think Lady Seren was gazing at me that way... I was taken aback.

I'd long found it embarrassing to witness my appearance and voice reproduced by the Recording Orb. When I started using them, I always felt the urge to destroy whatever Recording Orb had footage of me.

Now that I'd gotten used to it, I didn't care so much anymore, but today, for the first time in a long time, I was so shaken I couldn't even watch it.

My appearance was so different from how I presented myself in meetings and so on.

I was astonished at the embarrassing look on my face. I'd never seen myself look like that before in my life. To think that I'd exposed such a face to Lady Seren. I could die of shame.

Unbearably pathetic, I thought, averting my eyes from the vision of myself.

That would have been bad enough. But Lady Seren's response... The bashful look on her face, her tone, even her gestures—each had a stunning effect on me. This was neither the time nor the place, but I couldn't stop my heart from racing.

But luckily, now that Lady Seren had started heading into the deep forest, she was no longer watching me. It was a relief.

Calm mind, calm mind.

Despite my inner turmoil, I was satisfied that my advice had been correct. Walking like this should also afford me enough time to calm down.

I breathed as deeply as I could as we walked.

Right. I had an important mission today. It was not the time to get flustered.

We would need to prepare a suitable record for submission, either on the next occasion or the one after. I knew from the beginning that we were on a tight schedule.

Fighting a mid-ranking magical beast for the first time today and achieving a B-rank or better result in beast subjugation the next week was almost impossible.

The only salvation was that Lady Seren had demonstrated her mid-level magic with such deadly accuracy it was clear she'd mastered it. As for her practical beast subjugation skills, the accuracy and proficiency of her magic would be able to be comprehensively judged during mid-ranking or higher beast subjugations.

Usually, things like accuracy and proficiency take six months to a year to hone.

I'd never expected Lady Seren would be able to wield mid-level magic after such a short period of training or that her accuracy and proficiency would be at a level that might impress examiners. With Lady Seren's talent, she might be able to defeat a mid-ranking beast with the mid-level magic she'd learned.

However.

Even though I thought that I had concerns.

To start, one must never lose focus during battle. Mid-ranking magical beasts are formidable enemies that even experienced adventurers struggle with. The slightest misstep could result in serious injury or the loss of life.

People aiming to become High Mages are generally the most elite, even at the Magic Academy. Those with abundant magical power are adept at casting thick protective barriers. The examination, too, is designed to allow only those with the experience and ability needed to defeat mid-ranking beasts to pass.

Lady Seren did not have that level of experience.

Even so, and perhaps oddly, I was unusually confident about her ability to

pass. Times like this called for extreme caution.

Lady Seren didn't need my faith in her right now.

What she needed was vigilance and caution—the awareness she is still a combat beginner, lacking experience.

In an emergency, I was the only one who could save Lady Seren's life. I'd been prepared for that possibility, too, since I first took her out on a beast subjugation jaunt.

I gathered my magical energy in my right hand and dispersed a small wave to check the vicinity for magical enemy energy.

All right. Things were looking good today. I'd be able to cast my magic smoothly at any moment without issue, should anything happen.

I wouldn't intervene until the last second, in deference to her goals. Even so, I kept my magical energy circulating through my body so that I'd be able to protect her.

We continued walking for around an hour.

The forest grew darker and darker, and the green of the foliage grew more and more dense.

"It seems that the types of trees around have changed a little..."

Lady Seren muttered, her voice a little stiff with tension.

She did not look back. Instead, she continued on, highly aware of her surroundings. Good.

"The books said these kinds of trees tend to grow only in the deepest part of the forest."

"Good, it looks like you've done your homework. We are definitely in the mid-range of the forest now. We can expect mid-ranking magical beasts to appear at any moment. Mid-ranking magical beasts are so huge and ferocious that they can't be compared to low-ranking magical beasts. One blow might be enough to kill you. Be aware of your surroundings as you proceed."

"...Understood!"

I heard her gulp, and her back straightened even more.

I was relieved to see she had a proper sense of danger.

Then, as we went further inside, the presence inside the forest suddenly grew stronger.

“!”

The presence of a beast. And quite a strong one, too.

A mid-ranking magical beasts for sure. But Lady Seren’s ability to perceive the magical energy of beasts was still weak. She didn’t seem to have noticed it yet.

I stiffened with tension.

If it were me, I’d be able to defeat it with a single magic shot, but not so with Lady Seren. It was a formidable enemy that might lead to her death if she did poorly. Having to watch the battle unfold, knowing I couldn’t do a thing until the last moment...it chilled me with fear.

I’d rather take on several special-level magical beasts by myself than this.

“L-Lord Viol! Could it be...?”

Hearing the tension in her voice, I knew she’d sensed the magical energy of the mid-ranking magical beast.

“The air hurts... It’s almost like thorns are piercing my body...”

Yes, that was the magical energy emanated by a mid-ranking magical beast, all right. Even with a weak ability to perceive enemy energy, they emit such strong power that no one could miss it. Conversely, other, trickier beasts of the more advanced levels can hide their magical energies from perception, but mid-ranking magical beasts were characterized by strong, piercing magical auras.

With this level of magical energy, there was no doubt it was a beast of considerable strength, even amongst other mid-ranking magical beasts. How unusual to encounter such a strong mid-ranking magical beast as soon as we’d entered the heart of the forest. *Just our luck*, I thought... I was instantly on high alert.

Then the trees in the forest trembled, and a powerful shadow attacked Lady

Seren with a roar.

“Yeek!”

Giant fangs hit her protective wall right before Lady Seren’s neck.

A Regal, a leopard-shaped magical beast rarely seen in the mid-forest, was gnashing its teeth against Lady Seren’s protective wall. It was vastly tall; I’d never seen such a beautiful specimen.

I gritted my teeth. A tricky opponent.

This type of magical beast captures its prey with its expandable claws and strong forelimbs and uses its terrifying fangs to bite the neck in a killing blow. I’d heard that if the prey was too large, it latched on, biting the entire muzzle to block breathing and suffocate it to death. A natural hunter, with ferocity, speed, strength, and the smarts to make the best use of them.

Honestly, Lady Seren had a big challenge on her hands.

The Regal’s fangs gnashed at the air as it released a terrifying, rumbling roar.

Each time the Regal’s maw opened, the wide red mouth gaped around Lady Seren’s back, and the huge tongue lapped at her head as if trying to taste its prey. As drool dripped and ran, Lady Seren’s slim form fell backward, pushed down.

Aiming for Lady Seren’s neck, the Regal’s jaws yawned again, but the protective wall blocked them.

Lady Seren stared at the Regal’s jaws biting at thin air as if transfixed. Her face was milky white, and I realized that terror had taken her fighting spirit.

She lay frozen, arms and legs sprawled. The protective barrier was holding up amazingly, but... It would be no surprise if it broke down at any moment.

I had to do something.

Slowly, I raised my hand, generated Wind Cutter, and hit the Regal. Perhaps distracted by Lady Seren, the Wind Cutter struck it with surprising ease, and the Regal leaped backward in surprise.

Taking advantage of the distraction, I positioned myself between Lady Seren

and the beast to block her from the view of the Regal.

“Lady Seren!”

No response.

I couldn't sense her moving behind me, but nor could I take my eyes off the Regal. I shouted at Lady Seren, my voice harsh.

“Lady Seren! Pull yourself together!”

Then I heard a sucking gasp behind me. Apparently, she'd been so scared she'd forgotten to breathe.

“It's all right, Lady Seren.”

“S-Sorry... I...”

“You don't have to talk. Put up the protective barrier again.”

“Right...”

Lady Seren whimpered in response, and then I sensed the protective power behind me strengthening. Relieved by its robust thickness, I barked out further instructions.

“Put up a Wind Wall in front of me.”

“All right...”

She was sobbing, but the Wind Wall she conjured was strong. The Regal, too, seemed startled by my ambush, glaring at me without an awareness of his surroundings, breath bated, ready to pounce.

“Lady Seren, activate the Recording Orb.”

“Huh?”

“Take a good look at my fighting style and use it in the next battle.”

“Oh... Yes!”

She was still sobbing, but I was relieved she'd responded.

Her white face flickering in my mind. What a terrible fright she'd suffered. I wanted to kill this beast in a single blow and take Lady Seren into my arms to console her. I wanted to wipe away her tears, encourage her, and tell her she

was safe. But I had to prioritize acting in a way that would help her achieve her goals.

I moved to the side so that Lady Seren could see the battle better.

The Regal's silvery eyes focused on Lady Seren, and at the same time, I heard the sound of gulping.

"Watch this."

Simultaneously, I launched an attack with Wind Cutter and cast Wind Wall.

The leaping Regal collided with the invisible wall and was knocked off balance, after which I quickly cast another Wind Wall around it before lobbing a Wind Bomb over the wall.

In addition, I cut off the branches of the surrounding trees with Wind Cutter to make improvised spears and threw them in the area where the Wind Bomb just exploded.

That should have caused quite a bit of damage.

I slowly released the Wind Wall imprisoning the Regal.

"Aha, a stubborn fellow."

I mumbled involuntarily. Surprisingly, the Regal was not dead, even though he was hit not only by my Wind Bomb but also by countless wooden spears.

Blood stained its beautiful fur, but still, it bared its fangs and quivered, struggling to pull out the wooden spears that staked its body to the ground.

Its eyes blazed, still fixed on my throat.

"Lady Seren, come here."

"Y-Yes..."

Her voice was weak and tremulous, no doubt because her fear had not yet subsided. But if she didn't recover quickly now, this incident could impede her in the future. Unfortunately, the reality was that we didn't have the time to wait for her to regain her composure. It might have been a little brutal of me, but I needed her to get it together.

Dead leaves crunched unevenly behind me. Her steps were still unsteady and

uncertain. Fighting her tremors, Lady Seren drew next to me.

“Sit down if you’re so unsteady on your feet.”

From the corner of my eye, Lady Seren looked up at me sadly. I wanted to look back at her, too, but the Regal’s fighting spirit was alive and kicking, so I couldn’t take my eyes off it. Staring at the Regal, I addressed Lady Seren.

“You can sit. Just finish it off with the full might of your magic.”

“M-Me?”

“That’s right. Find out how much damage your own magic can do to a mid-ranking magical beast. That, alone, will serve as a good experience.”

Holding her breath, Lady Seren stiffened.

It was mid-ranking but had high defense. If her attacks didn’t penetrate it to the extent she’d expected, she might panic. It would be better for her to get a grasp of her attack power now, while it was pinned.

“...”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lady Seren turn her gaze on the Regal as if she had made up her mind. Watching her try to calm herself down by taking deep breaths over and over... The sight pained me.

“Don’t force yourself. You can do it seated.”

“No!”

Shaking her head firmly, Lady Seren took a step forward. Her body began to fill with a great deal of magical power. And she trembled as if she could barely contain it.

“Woah. Are you all right?”

Without thinking, I reached out a hand to support her, but Lady Seren planted her feet stubbornly and regained her balance.

“It’s okay. I... I have to do it.”

Seeing her sway and stagger but still focus on her magic hurt my heart. But since I urged her to do this, it would make no sense for me to stop her.

I watched in silence as Lady Seren battled the fear inside her.

“Guh...!”

With a pained grunt, she let forth a burst of Wind Cutter from her hand. The recoil sent her flying backward. There was no way she’d have been able to stay on her feet with that one.

The Wind Cutter she’d fired rained down on the Regal and the wooden spears pinning it to the ground. The sound of dull thuds came in quick succession.

“Not yet!”

“Yeek?!”

Without hesitating, I covered Lady Seren and quickly strengthened the protective barrier to the max.

Because I could see that the wooden branches spearing the Regal to the ground were in splinters, and the Regal seemed to have regained movement, kicking at the ground.

It hit hard against the protective wall, and Lady Seren stiffened. Tears poured down her face from her wide-open eyes.

“Lord Viol! Are you hurt?!”

Her hands roamed around my neck. No doubt the leaping Regal had gone for my throat. Even on the brink of death, badly wounded, it still went for me. It was our enemy, yes. But I respected its spirit.

“I’m fine.”

“Wait!”

“Woah!”

I got up and tried to fight back, but Lady Seren yanked on my cape, and I lost my balance.

“Cast Wind Wall!”

A dull sound of something hit the Wind Wall Lady Seren cast.

The Regal, covered in wounds, had jumped at me again, never learning its

lesson. Through tears, Lady Seren seemed to have cast a strong Wind Wall.

“!”

Groaning a regret-filled lament, the Regal suddenly disappeared, and I held my breath.

“Lady Seren, finish it off! It’s about to escape!”

“Y-Yes!”

Lady Seren, flustered, released her grip on me. I took that moment to sit up.

To add to the Wind Cutter Lady Seren had shot, I shot my own Wind Cutter spell with all my might. Skewered by a barrage of Wind Cutter blades, the Regal roared and fell heavily to the ground. Just one more second of inaction, and it would have gotten away.

Staring at Regal’s massive, blood-soaked body, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“That was close. It almost got away from us.”

“I’m sorry, I...”

“I wasn’t just talking about you, Lady Seren. If we let a wounded magical beast escape, we’ll be in a world of trouble later. Once you’ve hurt a magical beast, it’s an iron-clad rule that you’ve got to finish it off. Remember that.”

“...Understood.”

Still sitting where she’d fallen after casting her Wind Cutter, Lady Seren answered in a weak voice.

The tears finally stopped, but Lady Seren’s voice was so weak that I felt a pang of pity for her. She was doubtlessly beating herself up about how she’d gone to pieces when faced with the Regal. As a teacher, what should I say to her? I racked my brain.

I didn’t even expect to come across such a powerful Regal this soon into the mid-forest. The enemy was much too strong, and its appearance was too sudden. That said, though, it was still a mid-ranking magical beast that would have fit our requirements.

It might have been the best opponent for her to brace herself for fighting

mid-ranking magical beasts.

“I’m completely useless. I can’t believe mid-ranking magical beasts are so terrifying.”

“Well, that Regal was quite a high-ranked enemy as far as mid-ranking magical beasts go.”

“Even the Wind Cutter, which I tried to shoot with all my might, didn’t do the least bit of damage.”

“Hmm.”

“I was so scared I could barely move. Pathetic...”

As I thought, she was ruminating on her own failures.

Lady Seren was replaying the battle in her mind, head hanging, mind working. True, Lady Seren’s performance hadn’t been ideal, but it wasn’t all bad. I found it regrettable that Lady Seren tended only to focus on the negative aspects.

Of course, it’s important to reflect. But it’s also important to acknowledge the good parts and bring them forward to the next battle.

“Right, it might be time-consuming to kill a mid-ranking magical beast with the level of magical power you just showed. You’ll have to practice until your power is strong and steady, no matter if you’re psychologically impacted by the battle.”

“All right.”

“Lady Seren.”

“Yes?”

Lady Seren finally lifted her head to look at me. I was relieved to find that those eyes hadn’t lost their spark.

“What is it?”

“Hmm?”

“It looks like you’re smiling...”

I was smiling? I quickly covered my mouth. I often end up smiling like this

when I'm with Lady Seren. Still, I couldn't help it. Seeing her work so hard in the face of such fear warmed me inside and made me smile.

"Well, you seemed quite frightened just now. But I was relieved that it didn't break your spirit."

"I certainly prepared myself for death several times... To be honest, even now my legs are shaking... But in the end, I didn't die, so I'll count my blessings. If I give up here, it will just prove I shouldn't have even tried from the beginning."

"Well spoken."

Looking closer, not only her legs, but her hands were trembling, too. As she gazed at me, her eyes were glistening.

"Then, are you still prepared to do your best today?"

"Of course. I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight if that pathetic display just now was all I'd achieved today."

"That's the spirit."

I lightly stroked Lady Seren's head and smoothed her messy hair. When she cried, it alarmed my heart, and I wanted to hug and soothe her, but she had enough strength to stand up properly.

Looking calmer now, the color, too, had returned to her cheeks. Like this, I was sure she'd be able to handle the next battle, just as she had said.

"Incidentally, Lady Seren, can you identify the good aspects of your performance in that battle?"

For the sake of her future growth, I got right back to business.



"HEY, Vi, are you listening? It was really a huge wake-up call for me."

"I'm listening. I'm listening."

"But your ears were flat, and you were lying down."

"Woah."

When Lady Seren's finger tickled my ear, I leaped to my feet. How

embarrassing that my ears had begun to twitch unconsciously like they were repelling water.

Seriously, Lady Seren. Tickling my ears is simply beyond the pale. How am I supposed to suppress these shivers of delight?

“Hehe, your ears are so cute and twitchy.”

I guarded both ears with my forepaws to avoid Lady Seren’s groping hands.

After that, Lady Seren went through two more battles with mid-ranking magical beasts before we returned home. Despite that, she didn’t neglect her special training after returning. Today, ultimately, she hadn’t gotten to a point where she could defeat a mid-ranking magical beast by herself. I understood that she wanted to push on with her training.

Of course, I was present for the training, too, in Vi form. But as soon as I declared the tutoring session was over, Lady Seren started talking about what I’d said during the day’s subjugation sojourn.

It was so embarrassing; I almost fainted. And worse, she tried to pet me whenever she got the chance. My mind and body were being subjected to extreme indignities.

Lady Seren, unable to get her hands on my ears, looked dissatisfied. Then she got up from the table as if she’d thought of something. When I saw where she was heading, my heart began to pound.

The side table beside Lady Seren’s bed. No doubt, over there, we had the Dessert of the Day. Today, too, she made sure it was properly prepared.

Delight made my spine straighten. All of a sudden, I found myself sitting up, catlike, waiting for Lady Seren.

Seren 19

An Important Realization

“THANKS for waiting. Today’s dessert is a special one.”

“I see. I look forward to it.”

His response was curt, but Vi’s tail stood up straight, his cat eyes sparkling. He was beside himself with anticipation. *So cute.*

As soon as I put the dessert basket on the table, he brought his nose close to it and said, “It smells good.” Seeing his joy pleased me.

“The head chef thought this up especially for you, Vi. Isn’t that neat?”

“For me? He knows I eat these desserts?”

“I started asking for midnight snacks every day all of a sudden, right? He asked why, so I explained that we always eat together.”

“To make sweets for cats...the head chef of your household must be quite an odd person.”

Vi opened his eyes wide, a little surprised, but his ears and nose continued to twitch, and he kept shooting glances at the dessert basket as if unable to wait any longer. It made me smile.

After preparing Vi’s water and my tea, I sat at the table and opened the lid of the dessert basket. What emerged was a baked confection in the shape of a fish.

“So cute! A fish-shaped sweet,” I exclaimed.

“Fish for a cat, eh? Very simple. But, of course, it doesn’t seem to contain any actual fish.” Vi stiffened, then pulled back and said, “No, it doesn’t smell like fish. It’s soft, sweet... A happy scent, like pancakes.” His nose twitched again.

“Oh, Vi, do you hate fish?”

“No, I like it. I just don’t want it in sweets. Confectionery should be sweet.”

“That’s true... Oh, there are also some small fish.”

Beneath the palm-sized, fish-shaped pancakes, small fish filled a tall glass

dish. And behind that was a small piece of paper. No doubt this was from the chef. These must have been his masterpiece. I pictured him as a silver fox with a snappy air working hard to design these little fish desserts and smiled to myself.

“According to this note, these little fish are for you, Vi,” I said.

“Hmm, that makes sense, considering my size. These are bite-sized for a cat and would be easier to consume.”

“Here you are.”

I picked up one of the little fish and held it to his mouth. Vi snapped it up.

“Faintly sweet, with a mild flavor. Simple, yet delicious,” he appraised.

“Oh, I’m glad you like it.”

After feeding Vi another fish, I reached for one of the palm-sized fish that appeared to be for me. Vi was right; it was impossible to eat in one bite, but there didn’t seem to be a knife or fork. I had no choice but to break open the pancake with my hands, and a thick, gold jam and pure white, fluffy whipped cream peeked out from the exposed flesh.

“What is that?!” Vi cried.

“I think it’s jam and whipped cream,” I said.

“That’s not what I meant! Mine have neither jam nor cream inside!” he whined.

I had to laugh.

The small fish were the size of my index finger, and it was hard to imagine how jam or cream could fit inside. These must have been simple fish pancakes made only with pancake batter to make them more suitable for a cat.

“Don’t look so sad. I’m sure the head chef was thinking about your health, Vi.”

“My... My health?”

“Yes. We discussed you the other day, and the head chef was adamant. He said, ‘If you give cats too many sweets, they might get sick. I’ll research foods cats ought not to eat.’ And he thought about the size, too. I think he really thought about what would be best for you when baking these,” I explained.

“Well... Well, I am grateful for the thought.” Vi’s ears and tail drooped. On closer inspection, even his whiskers were sagging, unsatisfied. “But I’m not a *real* cat, so there’s no need for such concern... I suppose you can’t exactly explain *that* to the chef...”

Vi wanted to eat real sweets, but because of the chef’s kindness, he had to eat bland ones. Even so, he took it gracefully. What a sweet cat. I gently offered him my portion.

“Let’s go halves. I probably shouldn’t eat too much, myself,” I said.

“Are you quite sure, Lady Seren?”

“Of course. Delicious food tastes better when shared.”

Vi’s eyes sparkled happily. His ears perked up, delighted. As soon as he bit into the large fish I held out, he moaned and sighed happily.

“Ah yes, this is the completed article...!” Vi muttered in tones of deep emotion.

I took that to mean it was delicious. With a chuckle, I ate my half.

Surprisingly, it wasn’t as sweet as I thought.

Plenty of whipped cream gave it that light sweetness. The texture was very smooth, and the pancakes were moist and delicious. And the golden jam complemented the taste and texture. Although there was only a meager amount of it, it had a strong presence. And, though it had a thick and rich sweetness, it was chunky with fruit pieces and fun to chew as it rolled around in the mouth. The unexpectedly crisp texture of the pastry was also delightful.

The faint sweetness and elasticity of the pancake, the smooth texture of whipped cream, and the rich sweetness and pleasant texture of jam combined to create an enjoyable eating experience.

It was an exquisite dish that made Vi groan: “It’s the complete article.”



AFTER enjoying our late-night snack, I sent Vi home and went to bed with the Recording Orb in my hand.

There was still around a quarter of an hour until I had to fall asleep.

Even if just for a short time, taking another look at the Recording Orb would allow me to reflect on today's battle and carry what I've learned into tomorrow's training.

I laid down on the fluffy duvet and gazed up at the Recording Orb, nervous. Pressing the lens I'd borrowed from Lord Viol against the Orb to project the recording, I slowly imbued it with my magic power.

I didn't have much time this evening, so I planned to rewatch the battle against the leopard-type mid-ranking beast known as the Regal. It was the shortest of my recordings and my poorest battle performance. It was the first time I'd ever taken on a mid-ranking magical beast.

Hearing my own sobs the moment the recording began filled me with embarrassment. In the field of view, I could see Lord Viol's sturdy back. Seeing Lord Viol standing protectively over me lent me a sense of relief, but then he moved sideways, and the terrifying sight of the Regal leaped into view.

Despite being so ferocious, those strangely cold silver eyes glared straight at me—clearly the eyes of a predator staring at its prey.

"Watch this."

Hearing Lord Viol's voice from the Recording Orb, I sat up, flustered, in bed.

Lord Viol said, "Take a good look at my fighting style and use it in the next battle." Thinking of it as a precious record of an exemplary battle demonstration, I stiffened and focused.

In the recording, Lord Viol launched an attack with Wind Cutter and, at the same time, set up a cage of Wind Walls around the Regal. As the Regal was blasted away, it hit the invisible wall and lost its balance. Then more Wind Walls shot up around the Regal, and I understood Lord Viol's plan.

He'd used the Wind Cutter as a decoy.

But the Wind Cutter's killing ability wasn't enough for a mid-ranking magical beast. Since I couldn't even get past the tough outer skin with my current ability, using it as a decoy instead might be a shrewd move.

When the Wind Bomb inside the cage made of Wind Walls exploded, I was deeply impressed again.

Not only did the Wind Bomb explode and hit the Regal with multiple accurate blades, but the blades that missed ricocheted off the Wind Wall, making it doubly lethal.

In addition, Lord Viol used Wind Cutter to cut off the branches of the surrounding trees and let those tree spears fall like rain. Because of that, that terrible Regal was skewered to the ground and couldn't move. Those branch spears added a lot to the attack.

I released a huge sigh.

Lord Viol said it would be advantageous to use the environment as I fought. My sense of imagination and practical application of my skills would be appreciated. This attack truly embodied those elements.

When I was actually facing the Regal, I was so scared that I couldn't think of anything, but in a moment of calm reflection such as this, I could see what Lord Viol had been trying to teach me.

And though he was using magic that I could technically conjure myself, I was shocked at the difference in his level of accuracy, power, and magical deployment speed.

There were so many things to learn in combat: how to build up magic power, the timing of deploying multiple spells in quick succession, the tactics when fighting magical beasts, and so many other things. I was glued to what I was seeing.

I want to play this record over and over again. It could almost become my secret textbook.

"Just finish it off with the full might of your magic," instructed Lord Viol in the recording.

"N-Now?" I had asked.

"That's right. Find out how much damage your own magic can do to a mid-ranking magical beast. That, alone, will serve as a good experience."

Seeing Lord Viol try to inspire me to finish off the Regal, even as I sat there in terror, flooded me with gratitude and made me feel small at the same time.

Because I knew what happened next.

My Wind Cutter couldn't inflict a single wound on the Regal after I'd shrunk in fear. Instead, I cut off the spears pinning the Regal down, endangering not only myself but Lord Viol, too.

"Not yet!"

"Aaah?!"

As I squealed, Lord Viol's face appeared close-up, and the scenery behind him spun. Simultaneously, the Regal leaped at him, its horrible, crimson maw approaching Lord Viol's neck.

I was moved beyond words that Lord Viol risked himself to cover me and try to protect me, but I was also scared that those terrifying fangs would reach his neck. My whole body trembled. I faintly saw the Regal fall backward, deflected by the protective wall, but my eyes focused on Lord Viol.

Fear. Concern.

At the time, I was too panicked to react, but knowing now that Lord Viol was safe, this scene was embarrassing for some reason. Alone, in an agony of embarrassment, the alarm sounded, indicating it was time for sleep.



THE next day, during class at the Academy, I went over the events of last night.

It was a good thing the alarm had sounded when it did. After that point in the recording, I got to my feet and did everything I could to prevent Lord Viol from having to finish the fight. A scene like that was too embarrassing to watch.

Just thinking about it made my face hot, and I fanned myself with my hands.

Uh-oh. This isn't the time or place to rehash it. I had to think positively, use the experience I gained from yesterday's battle and viewing the Recording Orb, as well as the advice Lord Viol had given me, and make a study plan for the future.

As far as the Academy went, I'd read ahead, and nothing in today's class was new to me. I should be able to make a secret plan to study magic while lending half an ear to the class. And so, I hid, amongst my schoolbooks, a series of scribbled notes, all related to magic and magical learning.

After sitting through a few classes that way, it was time to leave my seat and move to a different classroom.

"Seren, you seemed deep in thought today. Was there anything you didn't understand?"

"Huh...?"

Lord Riesz startled me.

True, I'd been deep in thought, but that was because I was busy making a study schedule that would enable me to master shooting more powerful spells with greater stability. There was nothing about the classes that had given me trouble.

"No, not in particular. The lecture was easy to understand, and I was able to follow it." While answering, I casually hid the notebook, filled with magic-related descriptions, with my hand.

Most of my notes were hidden in my textbooks and class notes, and the writing itself might not be something most other people could understand, but that didn't apply to Lord Riesz. With his deep knowledge of magic, he could undoubtedly understand what I was writing. When I timidly looked up at him, he gave a small, wry smile.

"It seems that you were worried about something else."

Not knowing how to answer, I lowered my eyes.

Recently, Lord Riesz had been seeing nothing but my bad side. Possibly sensing my awkwardness, Lord Riesz gave me a gentle smile to reassure me.

"I'm not criticizing you. Don't look upset. ...Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Help?" I cocked my head.

"Yes. I believe I said this before, but I may be able to help you out. If you ever need help, I hope you'll confide in me."

“Lord Riesz...”

His eyes were sincere, and he seemed genuinely worried about me. Even at the salon, his consideration had been a big help to me on many occasions. He really was a kind person. I didn’t want to dismiss his thoughtfulness, so I mulled things over.

Is there anything I’m having trouble with right now that I could confide in Lord Riesz about? Maybe he might give me some good ideas if I asked. Since he went to the trouble of offering, maybe I should take him up on it after all.

However, since it was all about magic, it was difficult to discuss such things here.

“Then, Lord Riesz, may we speak as we head to the salon?” I asked.

“Certainly!” Lord Riesz smiled, looking pleased. “I’m happy to help you in any way I can, Seren. You can tell me anything.”

Though we were the same age, he was like an older brother to me. Calm, reliable. I was quietly very thankful for him.



“**SO?** What’s the issue? Are you still having trouble learning to fly?” Lord Riesz asked as we walked side by side down the hallway.

I responded by repeating, “Fly?”

Oh, now I remember. Before, Lord Riesz had caught me practicing wind magic, and I’d told him that I was practicing to be able to learn to fly.

Clearly, Lord Riesz remembered what I’d said.

True, I would love to be able to fly through the sky at some point. But right now, I have higher priorities. Unless I can get strong enough to defeat a mid-ranking magical beast, all my efforts to this point would be for naught.

Still, in terms of increasing and stabilizing magic power, flying and subjugating mid-ranking magical beasts might be the same.

Choosing my words carefully, I selected things I could freely talk to him about.

“Hehe, I’m still trying to get to grips with flying. It’s difficult to balance.”

“I believe it. Even now, flying is uncommon magic among mages. It’s probably a difficult form of magic to master.”

“I tried my best, but getting the airflow just right was difficult, and I kept losing my balance. I tried levitating using a carpet or a blanket, but I didn’t have much success,” I explained.

“That’s an interesting idea. That’s so like you, Seren, to brainstorm different angles like that.”

My honest confession made Lord Riesz smile. His smile gave me the courage to ask him a question.

“Ultimately, it seems to be about stabilizing the wind magic and increasing its power. ...I’ve learned that if you don’t have that kind of basic power, no magic technique will work.”

“Well, that’s about right,” he nodded.

“Did you learn mid-level and advanced magic as well?” As casually as possible, I shifted the conversation to mid-level magic.

“Of course. Well, I transferred to the Academy in the middle of learning advanced magic, so I haven’t actually learned much advanced magic.”

“Up to advanced...?! Lord Riesz, you’re amazing.”

I couldn’t help voicing my admiration. Mid-level magic was so hard to control. But advanced level... Lord Riesz must have been studying magic diligently. It seemed a shame—studying so hard and then moving on to a different path... But when I thought about it, I was in the exact same situation.

After all the hardships I went through to master princess consort training, I’m trying to choose another path. And I have zero regrets. ...Well, each person has their own circumstances and perspective. It shouldn’t matter what others think. With that conclusion, I continued my discussion with Lord Riesz.

“Is there any difference in the technique of controlling magic as the magic level rises from beginner to mid-level to advanced?” I asked.

“My word, Lady Seren, you’re not thinking of attempting advanced magic, are you?”

“Oh no, of course not.”

Lord Riesz smiled wryly as I quickly denied it.

“But if there happened to be a special method of controlling magic, I thought it might be useful for flying,” I added.

“Certainly. There may be techniques like that at the advanced level.”

My lame excuse seemed to have Lord Riesz convinced, surprisingly. He put his hand on his chin in thought.

“In that sense, there may be differences in control between the mid and the advanced levels.”

“Truly?!”

“Woah!”

I’d whipped my head around to gaze at him in surprise, and he reeled back a little.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be so abrupt,” I apologized.

“It’s fine... You’re always excited when it comes to your specific interests, aren’t you, Lady Seren?”

Lord Riesz laughed. I felt a little embarrassed, but I still got some valuable information. I wasn’t going to beat myself up for getting overexcited.

“I’m an earth attribute, so I’m not sure how much my advice will help, though.”

I nodded seriously as Lord Riesz laid out this caveat. Since our elemental attributes were different, I might not be able to apply his advice to my specific problem, but perhaps I could pick up some fundamentals.

“In the first place, mid-level magic and above is extremely hard to control compared to beginner magic. They involve combining multiple elementary-level techniques into one, for example.”

Yes, Vi had said the same thing.

“With elementary magic, you only deploy one spell at a time, so you can concentrate on it fully. But from mid-level, you start deploying two or more

spells at the same time. If your output isn't perfectly balanced, you won't be able to increase power, or you might even misfire. It's difficult to get it right."

"So then, the balance between the output of the two spells is important?" I inquired.

"Of course, there are people who can easily control it. Although I had a little trouble there." Lord Riesz cast his gaze down a little, looking embarrassed. But this conversation could be vital, so I had my ears pricked up to not miss a single word. "At first, I didn't really understand why it wasn't activating, so I tried varying the output of the two magics and realized that it's all about getting the balance right between the output of the two spells," he continued. "After that, I no longer stumbled when it came to learning."

"Lord Riesz, that's amazing...!"

Involuntarily, I gasped in admiration. His story was so encouraging.

Indeed, he might be onto something there.

I was thinking of controlling them together as one magic, but as Lord Riesz said, if I adjusted and controlled the output individually to ensure they were balanced, I could deploy my magic in a stable form.

Ah, but that isn't all. Can I find a balance that would allow me to achieve maximum power output? Thinking about it made my chest feel warm with hope.

"I hope I've been of some help?" he asked.

"You have! Very helpful!" I exclaimed.

"Good. The day you take to the skies is ever closer, Lady Seren."

"Thank you, Lord Riesz! I'm so glad I consulted with you."

I thanked him from the bottom of my heart.



"AMAZING, Lady Seren! The power of your Wind Bomb has increased dramatically."

The first words out of Vi's mouth were praise. Happiness washed over me.

Vi's ears and tail were pin-straight, and his eyes were wide. He must have been quite surprised.

"Is it possible to make such progress overnight?" he muttered. "...It seems like yesterday's subjugation was really frustrating for you."

"That's true, but I actually learned a neat trick from someone."

"What?"

Vi's ears twitched. They flicked in my direction. I couldn't resist giving those cute little ears a tiny poke.

Viol 18

The Day I Realized My Own Arrogance

LADY Seren poked my ear teasingly. My ears flicked, and she removed her finger. Narrowing her eyes, she smiled at me happily.

Yes, she was happy, but unfortunately, *I* was not. What advice could she have gotten that could have led to such rapid improvement?

“What trick? What did you learn?” I asked.

“You know... I think you said this before, Vi, but mid-level magic often combines multiple elementary-level spells, right?”

“Indeed.”

“Well, for a mid-level magic cast that combines two types of spells, it may fail to work or misfire when the output of those two spells isn’t well-balanced.”

“Balanced...”

I’d never really thought about that.

“The person I spoke with said he had trouble with his magic not activating properly, and he said he noticed, by adjusting the power output of the two spells, that there was a correlation.”

“...Interesting.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Incidentally, who gave you this advice?”

“Lord Riesz,” she said with a smile. “I’ve spoken about him before, haven’t I? He’s at the Royal Academy now, but he used to study at the Magic Academy. He knows a lot about magic.”

“He’s the one who noticed you were practicing magic... Borden’s younger

brother, right?" I muttered.

Hmm. Sounds like the younger brother is just as shrewd.

Judging from Lady Seren's story, the fellow had a good eye. It was a shame he didn't choose the path of a mage.

Come to think of it, when Borden's father fell ill, Borden also transferred to the Royal Academy. And, after only a few more years, when Borden Senior suddenly died and Borden became Prime Minister, his younger brother had no choice but to change course, too. I remember how bitter his expression had been.

We needed vital human resources to safeguard the territory's future, but wasting such talent was a shame.

I felt that way, certainly. But I also felt pure frustration for other reasons as well.

Honestly, I was shocked that Lady Seren asked someone else for advice about magic. And the fact that someone else could give her more accurate advice than me... that was a direct blow to the heart. I felt guilty for falling short before her and apologized quietly with my head down.

"I'm sorry, Lady Seren. I couldn't give you that kind of advice."

"Don't worry about it. You're Lord Viol's familiar, Vi, so you probably have a different concept of things than humans."

"But Lord Viol did not know, either, I think."

As I spoke, misery washed over me, and I knew that my ears and tail were drooping, but I couldn't make them stand up straight. I'd thought there was nothing I didn't know about magic, but it turned out I was just arrogant.

"Oh, Vi, don't look so depressed. There's only so much I can learn from you, after all. And anyway, you're the one who taught me enough to the point where I'm now trying mid-level magic."

Lady Seren's soft hands caressed my cheeks. It felt so good, and I nuzzled against her... Just a little.

Perhaps I was feeling a little...vulnerable.

“And even if Lord Viol doesn’t know of this... Well, that might make sense.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just something Lord Riesz said. Even though he had a hard time with it, there are people who can easily grasp controlling their magic. Lord Viol is a magical prodigy, so whether it be mid-level or advanced-level magic, he could learn it without much struggle, I believe...”

“Indeed...”

Yes, I rarely struggled with misfiring magic, as I have seen others do. I never even gave much thought to output balancing. Somehow, I knew instinctively how much output would be needed to increase spell power, just by how the flow felt and the general situation.

“But it’s great that you’ve realized this now,” I said. “It may be an effective strategy to resolve issues that arise in the early stages of learning mid-level and advanced magic.”

“Indeed, it may be so. At least for me, it’s much easier to understand this way.”

“Yes, Lady Seren, you’re showing tangible improvement all the time... Or rather, it’s impressive how effectively you utilize what you’ve learned as soon as you’ve grasped the concept itself.”

But that was just Lady Seren through and through. The hard part wasn’t necessarily grasping concepts but actualizing them. Impressed, I lifted my eyes to see Lady Seren’s eyes sparkling back at mine, finger to her lips as if indicating a secret.

“Actually, I heard that output balance has a direct effect on output power, too,” she said. “So I thought if I could find a way to output at max power, that might be good.”

“Seriously?!” I gaped at her.

“I’ve been working on that recently, trying to get the balance down.”

“That’s why your power has increased steadily with each round!”

My jaw was hanging.

Borden's younger brother was a bright youth, having realized that output balance directly affects the power of a spell. But Lady Seren's proactive nature led her to begin immediate experimentation... It was stunning.

"Amazing..." I said in awe.

"Even when I can't cast a spell quite right, it sometimes comes in handy. It enables me to awaken my mind to new things."

I looked up at Lady Seren—smiling nonchalantly—with respect.



BY the next day, Lady Seren was even more powerful.

"I've gotten the hang of it!"

She spoke with gusto and no hint of hesitation or worry. I never expected to see such rapid growth with my own eyes.

With her forming and testing her own hypotheses, it was better for me to keep silent and watch rather than speak poorly. I would give my advice only when she did as much as she could by herself.

Having restrengthened the barrier, I curled up on my small cushion on the table. From there, I casually observed Lady Seren, who single-mindedly fired Wind Bombs at the barrier.

How much time had gone by? The small clock in Lady Seren's room informed me of the time, and I knew it would be time to return home in about an hour. Lady Seren continued without rest or even a hint of hesitation.

Her concentration powers were formidable.

Even in our guild division, accustomed to putting up magic barriers and maintaining concentration, only a few people could continue to shoot offensive magic with such accuracy.

With large drops of sweat glistening on her brow, Lady Seren conjured Wind Bombs with complete focus.

As may be expected, her remaining magic power was lessening by degrees.

I got up from my cushion and stretched as much as I could. Stretching all the

way to the tip of the tail felt incredibly good. A cat's body has its benefits.

I waited for Lady Seren to pause between Wind Bombs and spoke.

"Lady Seren."

Lady Seren's shoulders jerked in surprise. Slowly, she turned to me, and when she met my eyes, she blinked as if she had just awoken from a dream.

"Vi..." she muttered, then took a deep breath as if remembering where she was. Her breathing was shallow due to over-concentration. "I'm sorry, I got preoccupied again."

"There's no need to apologize. Actually, the quality of your Wind Bomb has improved considerably. It's almost entirely different from the Wind Bombs you were conjuring just yesterday."

"Really?"

"Really. Wonderful work."

Lady Seren beamed, clearly thrilled with my praise.

"But you should rest a little. You've used quite a lot of your magical energy. You must be exhausted." I pointed with a paw at Lady Seren's handkerchief on the table.

"What about my handkerchief...?" Lady Seren looked confused, then touched her own forehead in surprise and laughed with embarrassment. "Oh my, I didn't even notice the sweat."

"It's good to concentrate, but you have to take breaks as needed," I advised.

"Yes, it's a little early, but shall we have tea?"

Lady Seren quickly wiped her sweat and arranged her hair in front of the mirror.

Indeed, it is never too soon for sweets. After all, today she improved rapidly without even needing my instruction. It was a good time to wrap things up, and maybe I'd give her a special reward after the tea.

Picturing a delighted Lady Seren, I chuckled. I was certain it would make her eyes sparkle.

“Well, today’s treat will surely be delicious,” she said.

“Indeed, I’m looking forward to it.”

I sat neatly down on the cushion.

After preparing water in a luxurious dish for me and making tea for herself, Lady Seren took her seat with the dessert basket in hand as usual. If I didn’t save her reward for after dessert, I doubted I’d be able to get any. I’ve been on the receiving end of Lady Seren’s overexcitement many times. With an innocent look, I pawed at the dessert basket.

“Today’s dessert smells exceptionally sweet,” I noted.

“Just a moment, okay? Oh, wow!”

“Oh! How beautiful!” I exclaimed.

A beautiful, brightly colored fruitcake was inside the basket.

“It’s so colorful and pretty. I wonder how many kinds of fruits are in it,” she said.

“I can’t even guess. There are so many different colors of fruit pieces. And in such varied shapes.”

A cute, round cake, it was about the size of Lady Seren’s palm but crammed with a variety of fruits on top and then drizzled with something like honey to add even more sweetness. The honey must have been the source of the delectable aroma.

“The sponge part of the cake looks so soft, too...”

I couldn’t take my eyes off it. I sensed Lady Seren smiling, but I couldn’t control myself anymore. It was all I could do to keep from drooling on the table.



“Oh, there’s something else in here, too,” she said.

“What is it?”

Lady Seren held an even smaller fruit cake and a familiar note from the head chef.

“Vi, I’m afraid that...”

“You don’t need to spell it out. That one’s for me, right?”

I knew it. It must be a bland cake for cats, made with the utmost kindness.

“Yes. Apparently, this one contains less sugar.”

Don’t laugh, Lady Seren. Ah, how terrible a thing it is, the kindness of the head chef.

“Let’s cut both in half and share, as usual,” she suggested.

“Thank you...”

Lady Seren didn’t hesitate. *How spoiled I am by her kindness.* I felt a twinge of guilt, yet the two things I could not ever resist were magic and sweets.

“Oh good, they sent a knife today.”

She cut a slice of the small fruit cake intended for me and lifted it to my mouth so it would be easy for me to eat. As I predicted, it was a refreshing fruit cake with mild sweetness.

The soft, moist sponge had two layers, with cream and mixed sliced fruit sandwiched in between. And small, whole fruits were on top. It had a variety of textures, making for a fun eating experience. When I bit into the fruit, the juice spurted out. Most refreshing.

I wondered if the small, whole fruits were also picked for my cat-sized mouth. The head chef employed by Lady Seren must have been a very detail-oriented person, indeed.

“It’s very light and delicious. The fruit has a refreshing acidity to it. I really like this cake,” Lady Seren said.

“Yes, indeed, it’s delicious.”

Not only had the chef dialed back the sweetness, but he'd maintained a good balance with a smart selection of fruit. After a few bites, my cake, which was small to start with, was gone in no time.

Looking up at Lady Seren, who elegantly brought the cake to her mouth and happily enjoyed the taste of the fruit, loneliness welled up in my chest.

Only two more Voiddays until the entry deadline for the exam. But you might also say that this could be all there was left. If her entry was accepted, we'd be able to spend happy times like this together until the day of the exam itself. But if Lady Seren failed to qualify for the exam, these days would end immediately. Thinking of no longer being able to be with Lady Seren this way made me desperately sad.

Tutoring Lady Seren in the specifics of magic, chatting about trivial things while enjoying delicious sweets. ...Physically, my daily routine was tougher now than it used to be, but strangely, each day energized me. Just thinking about these healing, soothing days being over made my heart ache.

If she made it through to the exam, then, once she passed, there would be a future where we might work together as colleagues. But if she failed to pass, I would have scant opportunities to speak with her again. After all, what reason would we have to talk?

There would be no need for her to study magic anymore and no earthly reason for us to meet each night like this.

Lady Seren, noticing the pain in my gaze as I looked up at her, turned to me with a soft smile. All of a sudden, she was holding a piece of the larger fruitcake.

"It's delicious, isn't it? Hey Vi, why don't you try some of the big one now?"

"Ah, yes. I've been waiting for this."

My tail quivered all by itself.

But what was the use of worrying about the future? For now, I should make the most of this happiness. And, to have the best shot at a future where she and I might work together, I would have to endeavor to create the best possible environment for success.

Taking Lady Seren's cute coo of "Open wide!" as a little extra spice, I opened my mouth.

"Ah, yes, you can clearly see how this cake is the completed article," I said. "The honey sprinkled on the fruit is also mixed into the cream inside. Instead of sugar, the chef used honey for the cream as well. Using it for both has elevated the sweetness, and the harmony of the overall flavor is greatly enhanced."

"Hehe, I can't wait to convey your comments to the head chef."

"I like it so much that I want to express my gratitude directly."

It's my principle to praise delicious things without sparing words. Ordinarily, I would like to compliment the chef in person, but alas, there was no way for that to happen.

I sighed, satisfied, after licking up the last few crumbs of delicious cake.

"Lady Seren, if possible, please tell the head chef I was very satisfied."

"I will. Just leave it to me."

Gazing at Lady Seren, who was gracefully enjoying the aroma of her tea, I slowly settled down on the cushion again. Now that I'd eaten some delicious sweets, this seemed the perfect opportunity.

"Lady Seren... My master has asked me to give you something."

"Oh, something from Lord Viol? Whatever could that be?"

Lady Seren looked genuinely pleased—a most adorable look. My embarrassment aside, I thought that now, of all times, she could really use this.

"He told me to hand it to you if you had a need for it. And I believe it will be of educational use to you at this juncture, Lady Seren."

As I spoke, I produced a Recording Orb.

"It's the Recording Orb my master submitted when he registered for the High Mage exam."

"...It is?!"

"At the time, I believe he used magic with various attributes, but I remember that the finishing move was the spell known as Wind Bomb."

“Is it really okay for me to look at Lord Viol’s recording?!”

“Ahem, it’s a little embarrassing because it was taken when he was just a rookie, and the spells in it are quite ropery... But it will serve as an example of another person’s battle performance. Since you aren’t even enrolled in the Magic Academy, you don’t have any chances to observe other people’s battles, do you? It seemed a shame.”

“I’m... I’m absolutely thrilled!”

Lady Seren took the Recording Orb in trembling hands, and I felt well satisfied, so I made my exit from her room. Avoiding the chimney pots, I crossed the duke’s roof.

Tonight the sky was cloudless and filled with stars. When I saw the beautiful crescent moon shining conspicuously in the night sky, I stopped. There on the roof, I stared at the crescent moon.

Gazing up at the night sky, I felt reluctant to return home.

Luckily, the night breeze was refreshing and felt good. Sometimes, I wanted to take a moment and think. I sat quietly on the roof and looked at the moon as I pondered things.

But all I could think about was Lady Seren—the dear lady I’d just parted from.

There was a question I’d been avoiding, even though I’d probably have to think seriously about it someday: whether it was the right thing to enter the contest without telling Lady Seren’s family.

Once she was registered, there would be no going back.

At the rate she was going, it was possible that we’d capture a submission-level combat record this coming Voidday. Her ability to concentrate was outstanding; I had no doubt she’d be able to pass the exam with flying colors.

The time had finally come to seriously consider our future response.

At first, I admired her guts and her drive to become a High Mage, even through her tears.

In fact, it was undoubtedly difficult for a mere subject such as herself to make the decision to break off an engagement with the royal family, but it was the

only way for her to escape the fate of becoming queen.

I thought it sweet and fitting if, having become a High Mage and broken off the engagement without hesitation, she could show up all those men who had ridiculed her behind her back. And if she became a High Mage, she would perhaps become my subordinate. In that sense, I saw my role as more of a protector or overseer.

And, as we got to spend more time together, as we do now, my feelings in that vein only intensified.

Her relationship with her sister was surprisingly close, and the servants seemed to adore her.

Lady Seren wanted to dissolve the engagement amicably without leaving a blemish on her family's name or on the honor of those around her. That's why she wanted to become a High Mage. If she became a High Mage, one of the men and women who risk life and limb to protect the country, neither the royal family nor those around her could criticize her. My hunch was that it was because she cared so much about her family that she came to this conclusion, and only after careful consideration.

But if I were Lady Seren's family member, I'd be sad that she didn't even ask me for advice. If Lady Seren suddenly became a High Mage without consulting anyone, she would reach her goal, yes, but a rift might open up between her and the family and servants who cared about her. And that would be a tremendous loss.

Her actions were born from a desire to help her family, and yet, how sad that this same action would weaken their bonds.

It would be most difficult to pull off.

Is there any way to somehow obtain her family's approval and THEN aim to become a High Mage? It might be me overstepping my bounds, but I may also be the only one who can make that future a possibility for her. I, after all, am the only one who knows the efforts she has expended to reach this point. It is I alone who can come up with a solution.

If she performed poorly, the path to becoming a High Mage might be closed. I

wanted to spend as much time with Lady Seren as possible, so that prospect was terrible for me. And, worse than anything else, all of Lady Seren's effort and hopes would be wasted. I wanted to avoid that at all costs.

Think about it harder. There must be some way.

Gazing at the beautiful moon, I agonized.

Lady Seren's father, who tended to be absent due to his international trade venture, was rumored to be an eccentric—someone who liked new and novel things.

However, when he buys the prototypes we produce at the Third Mage Guild, he openly asks his subordinates to explain the fine points of anything he has doubts about or doesn't understand. If there are any functional flaws, he gives harsh criticism. A sign that his take on things was trustworthy.

Despite being a prestigious duke, he spoke his mind frankly, and his reputation as an eccentric preceded him.

I could not imagine that he was a hard-headed person. As long as there was a convincing explanation, I doubted he would say, "Keep your mouth shut and get married."

But I had no idea how the duke might be behind closed doors with his family, so doubts crept in again. Besides, it would be heartbreaking for Lady Seren to tell her family the truth when they all expected her to someday become queen.

When we are indebted to others, we lose the ability to be our most genuine selves.

Ah, but it would be nice if I could attend a heart-to-heart and support Lady Seren. Impossible, I mused, smiling wryly, and then my face stiffened.

But wait. Was it so impossible after all?

If I said that I had learned of Lady Seren's exam registration and simply came to discuss the matter, would I not be able to accompany her without any awkwardness? After all, I am the Archmage of the Third Mage Guild and the one who will ultimately accept the successful test applicants into our fold. I, of all people, am in a position to be the first to notice her intentions!

Then, what issue could there be? Even if the duke strongly opposed her wishes, as long as there was a proper level battle Recording Orb turned in, and I myself gave permission, the registration would be accepted. If we met resistance, that would be the first time we needed to stand by our convictions and push through. That's all.

Yes. Even if we meet resistance, no real issue will impede us. In fact, the issue comes before that.

I wondered what Lady Seren would say if I urged her to confide in her father.

I did not want to force her. Offer options that will give her support to rely on later on, and support her choices as best I could. That was about all I could do.

Having finally come to an answer, I felt quite excited.

When we first met, I wondered if she would regret giving up the queen's throne so easily after going through so much hardship. I also wondered if she had any lingering feelings for the prince. But now she was well on the road to becoming a High Mage and taking it all so seriously. *Yes, this might be embarrassing, but ultimately...it could be most beneficial.*

High on the roof, I stretched once again and then hurried home.

Seren 20

Lord Viol's Precious Recording

AFTER seeing Vi out of the window, I put the Recording Orb I'd just received on the bedside table and started getting ready for bed. I'd eaten sweets and spent a lot of time practicing magic, and my hair was messy from my exertions.

Once I washed up, I headed to bed with my notebooks and pen in hand.

A Recording Orb Lord Viol had entrusted to Vi—I had no doubt there was a great deal I could learn from it.

I had high expectations for the great deal of knowledge contained within it, but part of me was even more excited to see a side of Lord Viol I might not usually get to see, and a younger Lord Viol at that.

I shook my head hard, telling myself to get a grip.

It would never do to get distracted and miss the combat tricks Lord Viol wanted to show me. I made myself comfortable and snuggled into bed.

Leaning back against the headboard, I spread out my notebooks on my knees.

It may be bad manners, but strangely enough, opening a notebook in bed just before going to sleep helps me concentrate, so when I want to focus on something, I sometimes study in bed like this.

I drew two vertical lines on the notebook to divide my writing space into three columns. If I jotted down the spells Lord Viol used in the left column, my perceptions in the middle column, and how I planned to incorporate them in the right column, it would surely help me in the next battle. Lord Viol's kind gesture would not go to waste.

With everything ready, I finally picked up Lord Viol's Recording Orb.

Once it began playing, it showed a nondescript forest scene with scenery not

so different from the forest I visited just the other day.

Nothing's happening...?

Just as I thought that, my vision shook, and two hands thrust forward, countless blades of wind shooting forth from them.

The Wind Cutter tore apart the bush in front of me as it sliced into the magical beast hidden inside.

Judging from the lurching, swaying point of view and its general position, I thought, *Aha, this Recording Orb was recording from the pendant itself.* Just looking at the recording, I understood the importance of recording from a human perspective. But the shaking was intense. It almost made me nauseous.

Silence descended on the area as if to indicate the defeat of the magical beast in the bushes in a single blow. Dead leaves crackled underfoot as the bushes grew closer and closer, and it was clear that Lord Viol was approaching the magical beast that he just felled.

His jet-black sleeve swung lightly on his outstretched arm as he raised his hand to the bushes. Then it happened.

“Woah.”

With a grunt of surprise, the whole field of view shook.

The bushes and grand trees, which should have been right in front, receded into the distance instantly, indicating that Lord Viol had leaped backward to evade an attack. However, as if he realized he could not avoid it, his left arm quickly swung up, and he adopted a defensive stance.

As I stared at the arm, the earth suddenly clustered around it, forming a solid-looking armor gauntlet. *Was that...earth magic?*

Before I knew it, my vision blurred, and then a dull sound battered my eardrums through the Recording Orb. Clumps of earth rained down from above, indicating that this attack had been impactful.

But there was no blood. Apparently, Lord Viol had evaded the sudden attack by the unknown beast.

“Shoot. That was too close... I should’ve put up a protective wall. I let my

guard down. Perhaps I skimmed too much on the force of my spell.”

I couldn’t believe my ears when I heard the voice.

That voice... Was it Lord Viol? There was a shadow of Lord Viol’s calm voice there, but this voice sounded different to me. Higher and a little hoarse. Perhaps he’d been going through a voice change period then, and his manner of speech seemed crude compared to now. As I reeled in surprise, the magical power of the protective wall wrapped all around me in an instant.

“A mid-ranker.”

Lord Viol sounded pleased, but I couldn’t see the magical beast.

Even when he’d blocked the attack with his arm, I couldn’t see it.

For a moment, I thought I saw a flash of a stunning green but wondered if a monster of that coloring was amongst the mid-ranking beasts. I held my breath as I searched my memory.

Graslang.

Yes, a snake with that name was amongst the mid-ranking beasts; one that possessed a deadly poison. Although many were three times the length of a human body, their diameter was only about the size of a circle made with a thumb and forefinger.

The beautiful, bright green body blends well against grass and tree leaves, and it often gets within striking range before you ever notice it. The books say they kill mostly by constricting prey with their slender bodies or by poison. At first glance, the snake might be rather beautiful, but it was said to be surprisingly aggressive and considered one of the most dangerous mid-ranking magical beasts.

If it were me, I might not have been able to block that attack. I hadn’t even spotted the beast until it lunged. Once again, I was reminded of the importance of maintaining a protective barrier.

“Damn, I lost sight of it!”

I heard Lord Viol’s impatient voice. The trickiest thing about the Graslang was you could quickly lose sight of it due to its outstanding agility and well-

camouflaged color. Once this vindictive snake locks on to an enemy, it will attack relentlessly while hiding.

I strained my eyes hard to see it, but I couldn't identify the Graslang amidst the surrounding scenery reflected in the Recording Orb.

The silence was almost suffocating.

There was no sound, and even the view didn't budge in the slightest. Lord Viol was holding his breath and looking around, perhaps trying to ascertain the presence of the Graslang.

He took a small, quiet breath.

Then a hand appeared, raised before him, and a clod of earth rose beyond that hand. That clump of soil quickly formed into a human shape, and as Lord Viol lightly waved his hand, it took the form of a disgruntled-looking boy.

It looked real enough to start talking at any moment. Unreal to think that Lord Viol conjured it out of magic.

The wary angle of his brow was also familiar to me, so much so that I couldn't suppress a smile. It looked like Lord Viol at the evening party, tense over the prospect of someone approaching him for conversation.

Despite the youthful face, the jet-black hair and eyes, and the pitch-black cloak were all just like Lord Viol. However, it was really sort of cute.

Giggling to myself a little in bed, Lord Viol's hand, as seen in the recording, released some other spell.

A gentle flame flickered in his hand, then flew into the Lord Viol-shaped clay figure. Then Lord Viol stopped moving altogether.

After a silence of indeterminable length, the trees all around shook.

Then, as a breeze broke the silence, the Graslang flew at the clay figure.

The Graslang's jaw, which seemed small, opened unexpectedly wide, and its gleaming fangs deeply pierced Lord Viol's clay figure.

Even though I knew it was just a clay figure, it still looked painful. I flinched and groaned in reaction. But the Lord Viol in the recording remained calm and

conjured a series of spells in rapid succession as if he had foreseen this.

He formed a small barrier around the clay figure and the Graslang and lobbed a Wind Bomb into the barrier's interior, causing a terrifying explosive sound. Dust covered the interior of the barrier. I could hardly make out what was going on.

However, when the barrier eventually lifted, the previously beautiful, bright green Graslang was shredded beyond recognition. It was easy to tell from the condition of its wounds that the blades of wind that exploded out and the dirt and small stones scattered by the explosion had all combined to pummel and puncture its body. Even the clay figure was destroyed.

"Hmm. Maybe fire would have been better."

After this comment from Lord Viol, who still sounded dissatisfied, the recording cut off.

As if waking from a dream, I blinked a few times and stared at the Recording Orb, which had returned to resembling a mere transparent glass ball.

Lord Viol really is amazing. I'm certain he was younger at the time of the recording than I am now, and what a spectacular battle!

I wanted to scrutinize it again, but when I looked at the clock, unfortunately, I didn't have enough time for a second viewing. Bedtime had snuck up on me while I'd been busily jotting down my impressions in my notebook.

With regret, I embraced the Recording Orb and fell asleep.



THE following day.

As time passed, I became more and more keenly aware of Lord Viol's magnificence.

After all, the more I thought about it calmly, the more I felt the magnificence of what Lord Viol was capable of, and I was stunned anew. He was on an entirely different level.

The clump of earth that took the form of Lord Viol must have been earth magic, but does earth magic add color? Or maybe it was an illusion, like when

he'd created that decoy of me.

Also, the fact that Graslant launched an attack on the clay figure without hesitation might mean that Lord Viol set up a spell that lured the snake to it. Or perhaps Lord Viol concealed his appearance with cloaking magic... I could only imagine how many magical spells must have gone into that one brief battle.

Another thing I noticed was that although the methods utilized were different, the recording was filled with things that Lord Viol had already taught me.

He'd given me a practical demonstration of what would happen if I put those things into practice in combat rather than just explaining it to me verbally. I couldn't have been more thankful.

Maybe I couldn't use various techniques with various attributes like Lord Viol, but at least I wanted to be able to use what I'd been taught. I would have to watch Lord Viol's orb and my own orbs over and over, then put them into practice and challenge myself.

I was more determined now than ever.



THEN, the following Voidday came around.

"Come on, Vi, let's go!"

"Oh, my. You're really excited."

Yes, I was very, very excited.

"I've been really looking forward to today!" I exclaimed.

"Being overly excited isn't going to do you much good. Try to calm down."

With Vi, who seemed reticent in reaction to my exuberance, I went out to the garden via the library window as usual.

While Vi was building an earth magic staircase to climb over the fence, I got out the object I had hidden in the garden. Vi, returning after having finished the dirt staircase, looked at what I was holding and frowned.

"...What do you have that for?"

“Oh, did I not show it to you last time?”

I smiled at Vi, who looked at me suspiciously. I was clutching the cart I’d borrowed from Gardener Dan.

“I’m asking because I do remember seeing it. Surely you don’t intend to bring that with us?” I could hear the skepticism in his voice.

“I put it here so I could bring it. It’s okay. Lord Viol has given me permission to practice flying.”

“Yes, he allowed it, but did he clarify that he meant you could fly during battles?”

I approached Vi as he hunched over in anger, fur standing on end, and tweaked his little nose. As he pulled back and guarded his nose with his paws, I brought my face close to his ear and whispered.

“Don’t be angry, Vi. Someone might find us if we stand about arguing here.”

When I said that, Vi flinched and raised his tiny black body. I scooped him up.

With Vi under my left arm and the cart under my right arm, I ran up the stairs. Once we were over the fence, Vi glanced at me, then instantly evaporated the dirt stairs.

Seeing Vi do magic is always such a thrill.

“You cast cloaking magic on us, too, right?” I asked.

“Of course. I always put it on in the library.”

“Thank you for your diligence.”

“Mm-hm...” he rumbled. Rubbing his face with his forelimbs as if he were embarrassed, Vi looked up at my face from his position in my arms. “By the way, you can put me down now.”

“Okay, but I’m fine with it like this today.”

With Vi under my left arm, I lowered the cart and put my foot on it.

“Wait! You can’t be serious.”

“Let’s go!” I cheered.

The cart floated up with us on board.

“This is too dangerous!” he hissed.

“It’s fine! I’ve learned to fly very steadily,” I assured.

“What... What a waste of magical power!”

“But this consumes less power than using wind as a running boost. In fact, there’s no running involved, so it doesn’t consume any physical strength, and we can even talk while we’re in motion,” I explained.

“...Yes, I see your point.”

Vi’s eyes were round, perhaps with fear, and his fur stood on end. His ears were flat against his head. Then, his eyes widened in surprise. The sight of the back of his head and little ears standing up was so cute. It must have felt good, leaning forward out of my arms, catching the wind.

“The wind feels good. It’s surprisingly comfortable, even though we’re going so fast,” he noted.

“Right?”

“You’ve really put some effort into this, haven’t you, Lady Seren?”

“Once I learned to stabilize my Wind Bombs, I thought I might be able to master this, so I tried it and learned how to fly.”

“Amazing...”

Vi’s utterance sounded impressed. I was thrilled.



BY the time Vi and I arrived at Lord Viol’s house, he had calmed down in my arms, and we were both enjoying the cart trip.

After changing clothes at Lord Viol’s house, I smiled as I looked at myself in the mirror.

When I put on the earrings and the bow with the green stones Lord Viol had given me and the clothes he’d laid out, I felt a sense of security, as if wrapped in a layer of protection. It was very reassuring.

I'd practiced a lot, so I was sure I'd do well today.

"Lady Seren, I apologize for keeping you waiting."

"Oh, Lord Viol, hello."

"It seems you brought something interesting this time."

"Ah, you must have heard about that from Vi."

As we chatted, Lord Viol placed a cute coffee cup in front of me. Judging from the color, I thought it was a cafe au lait with whipped cream on top, but the surface looked solid.

"Jelly...?" I tilted my head.

"Isn't it unusual? I just had to buy it. It's delicious; it simply seems to melt in your mouth. It's called coffee blancmange," he explained.

"How splendid."

"Wait a minute. I've discovered a technique that adds flavor." Lord Viol hummed as he dripped an amber liquid onto the coffee blancmange. "Move back."

"All right..."

As soon as I'd pressed myself against the back of the sofa, Lord Viol held his hand over the coffee blancmange. In an instant, flames danced.

"Whoa!"

After I shrieked, Lord Viol apologized and held the coffee cup in front of my nose. "But it tastes the best right after this. Try it."

I scooped some up with a spoon, and my eyes widened. I thought it was jelly, but I was wrong. It was so soft I could barely even scoop it up with the spoon. I carefully brought the trembling milky whiteness to my lips; it melted as soon as I put it in my mouth.

And after the fragrant flavor of coffee, the sweet scent of liquor wafted up through the back of my nose.

"You're right. What a luxurious scent," I praised.

“You couldn’t imagine it just from the way it looks, could you?”

I was delighted to chat with Lord Viol over tea and sweets; my courage for the upcoming battle was steadily building.

After chatting about nothing much and enjoying the flavor and mouth-watering texture of the coffee blancmange, it was finally time to depart. We would need to go into the deep heart of the forest if we wanted to encounter mid-ranking magical beasts, so we were on the clock here.

When we exited Lord Viol’s house, me with the cart in hand, I got a little nervous.

“All right, you can rest assured now,” he said. “I’ve cast cloaking magic over us both. ...Is it really okay for me to ride too?”

“I think two people can just about fit. But to be safe, please make sure the protective barrier around you is nice and solid,” I instructed.

I’d feel too guilty if I rode alone in the cart while Lord Viol had to walk, so I thought it best if he rode with me. But when I considered it further, the Archmage of the Third Mage Guild, a man who was the cornerstone of protecting the country, would be airborne with me. I would have to be extra careful.

Regretfully, as it was a tight fit, I asked Lord Viol to stand behind me. The bottom of the cart was steel, but there was a wooden frame around the bed, so I doubted he would slip off.

The moment Lord Viol stood aboard behind me with a creaking sound, my heart rate rose, and I became uneasy.

I was closer to Lord Viol than I’d anticipated.

Just keep calm, I told myself, but I wasn’t sure I’d be able to.

Delicate magical adjustments would be called for in the flight process, and I wasn’t sure I had it together enough. I wouldn’t be able to look him in the eye if my oversight caused Lord Viol to take a tumble from the sky.

I was struggling silently in my mind, but Lord Viol was also leaning back, looking most uncomfortable. If he didn’t hold on to the handle, he might lose

his balance upon acceleration. Most dangerous, but if he did hold on, we would be even closer together than when dancing.

The only saving grace was that at least we weren't face-to-face. I could hide my expression and my cheeks, which I was positive had to be redder than a cherry at this point.

While being careful not to express my nervousness, I apologized to Lord Viol. "S-Sorry it's such a tight fit. I'll do my best to get to the forest as soon as possible."

"No, it's not the cart, it's... This proximity... I feel somehow nervous," he confessed, his voice an octave lower than usual.

For a moment, I was dumbfounded that he was experiencing the same feelings. Then I snapped myself out of it and felt much better. Lord Viol and I were in the same boat, as it were.

I couldn't imagine from the expressionless face he'd shown when he put his foot on the cart, but it seemed that Lord Viol was also quite nervous over our close proximity.

I felt embarrassed, but I calmed down a touch, knowing I wasn't the only one conscious of it. Relieved, I tightened my grip on the cart's handle.

"Me too. It's the first time I've flown someone else on the cart, so it might shake a little at first. Please hold on tight to the handle!"

"Ah, right."

After observing his hands, sneaking out from behind, and timidly grabbing the handle, I slowly lifted the cart, utilizing the power of the wind.

"Oh, I'm not used to this feeling of floating," he said.

"It's all right. Surprisingly, I can balance two just as well as one."

It actually didn't alter things that much. There was little change in the force needed to lift the cart, prevent it from floating too high, and propel it in a specific direction. I thought it would wobble more, but surprisingly, the cart floated smoothly and gently.

"Then, let's proceed," I said. "Please hold the handle firmly until you get used

to it.”

“Understood.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Lord Viol’s grip strengthening, so I took the plunge and started moving at a reasonable speed.

“Woah.”

“Tell me when you feel more comfortable, then I’ll accelerate,” I said.

“It already seems quite fast?”

“It’s as fast as your usual wind-assisted running trick, but... Well, at least you don’t have to move your legs with this, so you can accelerate very fast, regardless of your physical limits.”

“Seriously?”

Incidentally, since the cart had four wheels, I considered having it run along the ground to reduce the consumption of my magic power, but I gave up on that since the cobblestones and so on would rattle us around most dreadfully.

Besides, when I practiced it in my room, the carpet got in the way and the wheels felt cumbersome. In the end, I concluded it would be better to float a little to accelerate more smoothly, and it would be more comfortable for us regardless of the ground conditions.

“I believe I’ve gotten a little more comfortable with it now,” Lord Viol said after a while.

“Then, time is scarce, so I will accelerate ahead.”

“Woah!”

I raised our altitude without delay and accelerated with all my might. In the city, it would probably be easier to fly at a high altitude where I wouldn’t have to worry about things like people and buildings.

“It... It seems awfully high?” Lord Viol said.

“Yes, doesn’t it feel so free? It’s the first time I’ve flown anywhere other than my room! Gosh, what a thrill!”

“H-Hey!”

It was simply amazing! Flying through the city and then flying over the grasslands in an instant.

The breeze was strong, giving good wind pressure. Just as I was thinking about that, I realized that the oncoming wind had suddenly grown much softer without any loss of speed.

“The wind...”

“I made a windbreak to block the oncoming wind,” Lord Viol said.

“A windbreak?”

“When accelerating, the wind will blast us beyond comfort, stinging our faces and making verbal communication impossible. So I have constructed a nice wind film to block the harsh wind flow.”

“How incredible!”

I hadn’t even thought of that. Lord Viol was, indeed, incredible.

Viol 19

What Speeds...

“HEY!”

“Lady Seren!”

“Do you hear me?!”

No good. Lady Seren couldn't hear me at all. And what speeds! Especially considering that she mentioned she had only ever flown in the narrow confines of her room.

When I got on the cart, I was extremely nervous, not to mention embarrassed by the unavoidable close proximity to Lady Seren. But when I realized we were flying higher than the rooftops and traveling at extraordinary speeds, I could no longer be distracted by such sentimental things.

Frankly, if I didn't hold on tight, I was liable to be shaken off.

Lady Seren! You flew low along the road until you got to my house...! What happened all of a sudden?

I wanted to ask, but the oncoming wind was so strong that my voice wasn't reaching her.

Unimpeded by road traffic, perhaps, we passed through the streets in no time, and now the refreshing green of the grasslands spread out below us. Even wind-assisted running wouldn't be this fast.

At first, I was afraid to fall from such a high place, but when I thought about it, there was no such risk, not with the power of wind magic to catch and hold us. And so, I gradually calmed down.

As soon as I calmed down, my thoughts shifted to this magic. *My magic obsession, it seems, knows no bounds.*

This magic seemed worth studying.

Observing the flow of magic, it seemed Lady Seren could control this box thing's movements by concentrating and channeling wind into it. As Lady Seren said, the magic was more efficient this way. Since the caster wasn't involved in the process physically, there was no need to worry about fatigue or physical restrictions.

Once you got the knack for it, I could see how it would be possible to increase the speed and fly on a higher trajectory.

However, there were drawbacks.

When I experienced it as Vi, it was slow, so the wind was comfortable. At increased speeds, the wind was so strong it stung my face and dried out my eyes and mouth.

It was uncomfortable; I constantly wanted to squint. It couldn't be helpful for the vision. Furthermore, since the sound of one's voice wouldn't carry against the rushing wind, it was difficult to communicate with a fellow rider. That was my current issue.

I mulled it over, gazing at the steadily approaching line of trees near where we had picnicked together. Perhaps I could do something about the wind beating against our faces.

After thinking about it, I set up a diamond-shaped barrier to surround myself and Lady Seren. In order to avoid wind resistance as much as possible, I pointed the sharp corner of the diamond in the direction of travel.

Ah, yes, that feels better. The wind deflected as I anticipated.

But a barrier spell... This, Lady Seren could not use. It was no issue while I was with her, but I had no doubt that Lady Seren would soon want to fly vigorously through the sky by herself.

When I tried to form a similar one using a curtain of wind, I developed something that was not so inferior.

Ah, this feels nice, allowing a breeze to blow in. But, unlike a barrier, this needed to be constantly cast and maintained. Fuel consumption, as it were,

wasn't efficient.

"The wind..." Lady Seren murmured to herself.

Aha, she noticed. I smiled secretly.

Indeed, the effect was excellent. Even Lady Seren's murmur reached my ears without being overpowered by the roar of the wind.

"I made a windbreak to block the oncoming wind."

"A windbreak?" Lady Seren turned to me, surprised.

Eyes forward... Eyes forward, please. I mean, no, we hadn't reached the forest yet, and there was nothing that we might bump into, but being under her gaze was rather frightening at this proximity. I quickly endeavored to tell Lady Seren the necessary information.

"When accelerating, the wind will blast us beyond comfort, stinging our faces and making verbal communication impossible. So I have constructed a nice wind film to block the harsh wind flow."

"How incredible!" Lady Seren leaned forward as if trying to see through the wind film. "I wonder if I can do it, too."

"I thought that you could, so I tried it using wind magic. ...But don't do it today. It's better to concentrate your magic power and mental energy on defeating those mid-rank beasts."

"Oh yes... You're quite right."

It wasn't even lunchtime yet. As Lady Seren said, we reached the forest while preserving stamina, time, and even magic power. With that being the case, she could fight against mid-ranking magical beasts in perfect condition.

"Since you flew here with great force, Lady Seren, we're almost in the forest. Or should we fly over the woods to the deep forest region?"

My question made Lady Seren a little hesitant.

There were pros and cons to it, in truth. If we flew to the middle of the forest, we would save more time and strength. Going through a place with uneven footing, like a forest, while being wary of magical beasts, drained energy and

stamina.

However, it was surprisingly effective to advance while taking out low-ranking magical beasts as a warmup. Since Lady Seren was still inexperienced in combat, the latter might be the better option.

“We’ll fly over and land somewhere just before the mid-forest zone. I’d like to maximize our time in the middle area to increase the chances of encountering mid-ranking beasts. ...But unfortunately, at my level, it would be dangerous to take on a mid-ranking beast without any warmup.”

“I see. That is very smart.”

It was a solid Lady Seren-esque choice.

We flew through the sky aboard the cart and entered the forest, looking for a place where the trees weren’t so densely packed. The terrifying thing was that Lady Seren had become accustomed to steering the cart by this point, and she continued through the woods without showing any inclination to get off of it.

She isn’t planning to fight aboard the cart with me as a hapless passenger, is she?

If the Recording Orb accidentally captured my voice or presence, there was no way we could submit it. While I was thinking about how to casually exit when the battle started, the back of my neck prickled with the hum of monster-like energy.

Ah, a magical beast.

Shortly after sensing it, Lady Seren slowly landed the cart. Apparently, even while flying, she could sense the magical power of the beast. And when it came to battle, I felt a strange sense of security knowing she was prepared to land and fight seriously.

Her skill at flying between the branches had impressed me, but it would take a lot of complicated magical work to keep the cart afloat. It would be difficult to use offensive magic or avoid attacks from magical beasts while flying.

After Lady Seren dismounted the cart and calmly activated the Recording Orb, I watched her fight several wolves. She was in good form. Already, I could watch

her with a sense of peace.

After just a few battles, she had grown in a surprising amount of time. I guessed this was also the result of her resolve to become a High Mage.

“I’m done,” she reported back to me.

“Indeed. Three wolves no longer pose any threat to you. Your Wind Cutter has more blades than ever. A steady improvement,” I evaluated.

“...Thank you!”

Lady Seren, who responded with a big smile, rested her hands on the cart, exhilarated. Then, when I handed her a new Recording Orb, her eyes sparkled.

“I’ll do my best!”

“Indeed. Please keep up the good work.”

“I will! All right, please board!”

Is she still planning to move by cart? I wondered, but flying by cart was overwhelmingly faster than walking. And with how bumpy the footing was, walking would be difficult anyway. Even wind-assisted running would be unfeasible. If we proceeded by cart, we ought to be able to reach the middle of the forest in no time.

“Then, let’s go.”

“All right.”

The floating cart moved so naturally that I didn’t even feel uncomfortable anymore. While weaving through the trees, Lady Seren’s wind manipulation skills improved dramatically.

“I’ll speed it up a little.”

As she made this declaration, the speed of the cart suddenly increased. I let out a “Woah.”

Our speed seemed to be increasing all the time. *No, no, if you fly at that speed, you won’t be able to avoid obstacles in the dense forest.*

My anxiety became reality—a thick branch sprang out of nowhere right in front of me. I confess I got a little frazzled.

“Lady Seren! Watch out! The branch!”

“It’s okay.” As Lady Seren spoke, calm in her voice, the branch was blown away.

“What did you do...?”

“I cut it to pieces with my Wind Cutter and blew it away with the power of the wind.”

“Seriously?”

The branches in the direction of our travel seemed neatly chopped off and created an open path in front of us. It was as if a clear road had appeared in the middle of the forest.

“Lord Viol, I would like to try a slightly rougher flight style. Is that okay?”

“Fine by me.”

Actually, I’d thought the flight style was already rough enough, but I wasn’t about to say that.

“Please hold on, then.”

“Woah!”

She made a sudden turn, and I gripped the handle of the cart in amazement.

“Ahh!” Lady Seren cried out.

“I’m sorry!” I quickly apologized. Planting my feet firmly and leaning forward for balance, I found myself extra close to Lady Seren.

“It’s... It’s okay...” she said.

Oh, phew. Luckily, she does not seem to be offended.

But even as I was relieved to hear Lady Seren’s response, I had to think, with these sudden turns, who could refrain from grabbing hold and leaning in like this?

I thought Lady Seren might learn from that blunder and fly more meekly, but she tried to change altitude frequently and make sharp turns. The way she’d been flying up until this point seemed tame in comparison. Her flying was wild,

rough, and came in waves.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I believe I’ve calmed down a little.”

As a result of the rough flying, I felt sick, as if on a violently rocking ship at sea. Lady Seren noticed, and now she was slowly flying low as we looked for an acceptable place to eat. In a sense, it was a relief that it was about time to eat lunch.

Distracted by carefree thoughts of lunch, a piercing magic power accosted my entire body, incomparable to the previous wolves. This strength was that of a mid-ranking magical beast.

Lady Seren seemed to have sensed the magical power, too. She smoothly landed the cart. Her touch was so soft that I barely felt it when we made contact... *Most impressive.*

“Lord Viol, please dismount.”

“At once.”

As soon as I got off the cart, it floated up again and moved away from me.

“Lady Seren?”

“I’m going to fight like this. Recording now.”

The Recording Orb glowed, dissuading me from speaking.

Like this...? You’re going to fight while aboard the cart?

Fighting mid-ranking beasts was dangerous for someone inexperienced like Lady Seren. Even if she put her heart and soul into it. In the first place, she had the protective wall up to avoid danger. If you added offensive magic on top of that, it would be too many spells to maintain at once, not to mention also manipulating an airborne cart. There was a major risk that having too much to do would dull her ability to make quick decisions.

However, I thought, yes, it’s risky, but at the same time, this way of fighting might also prove to be a deadly weapon for Lady Seren. I shouldn’t stop her without seeing how events unfolded.

Wind Bomb was the only mid-level magic Lady Seren could currently use. She could earn extra points elsewhere, but her base points would probably be low, a prospect Lady Seren had expressed concern about before.

However, if she developed her own bonus magic that allowed her to fly freely and master it at will, her basic points would shoot up. After all, flying was ambitious; magic schools didn't teach it yet.

And with me watching over her like this, I could always intervene and help her in an emergency.

I swallowed quietly and observed Lady Seren's fighting style.

"Here it comes!"

Lady Seren raised her voice and suddenly circled in the sky. At the same time, some kind of liquid splashed the spot where Lady Seren had just been, and a cloud of smoke rose from that spot with an unpleasant sizzling sound.

Acid...?

An ominous feeling hit me, and at that moment, an unpleasant sound resounded from the surroundings, like gears grinding together. The sounds, from multiple directions, told us how many enemies we had encountered.

"Acid Ants... Not good."

I clicked my tongue a little.

Their acid-spitting attacks were an issue, but their habit of calling in reinforcements and attacking as a swarm was another reason I'd rather not tangle with them. The Acid Ant has a long body, reaching up to about my chest when standing on its hind legs, and its armor is rock-hard.

One Acid Ant might not have been too bad. But, even among mid-ranked beasts, they're formidable foes due to their organizational strength, strong acid, and persistence, all the while using their numbers as a sort of shield. When encountering them in a group like this, there's not much you can do to fight against them. All you can do is prepare for death.

Insects are weak against fire, so fire magic like mine... Or wide-range magic might prove effective, but wind magic won't do much against them.

Well, that said, you might still be able to defeat them by lobbing a Wind Bomb into their swarm from the outside. Perhaps Lady Seren would pull off something impressive.

I hid myself with covert magic and watched how the battle progressed.

“So many... Gosh, this is frightening.”

Hearing Lady Seren’s murmur, I looked up; her face was pale. She was still floating in the sky with her cart.

The Acid Ants, who looked up at Lady Seren and swarmed her, steadily increased in number. Now there were twenty.

I had to say I was at least glad that Lady Seren could always escape to the sky. Still, surrounded by so many enemies, you could hardly blame her for feeling the sting of fear.

I was worried, but Lady Seren had made up her mind. She tightened her lips and stuck her right hand toward the Acid Ants as she stood astride the cart.

“Just stay calm... You can do this...”

Muttering as if to convince herself, Lady Seren began to cast her magic.

With a wall of pure wind, she surrounded the reddish-brown ants that were gathering in droves, and, just as I had thought of doing, she lobbed a Wind Bomb into their midst. A textbook fighting method. She had faithfully followed the teachings so far. *Hmm, not bad at all.*

Then I glanced up, sensing an unpleasant magical power.

“Lady Seren! To the right!”

“Ack!!!”

Something flew at Lady Seren. She dodged. The creature, whatever it was, cleverly kicked against the trunk of the tree and jumped toward her again.

“Guh...!”

Lady Seren cast Wind Cutter and hit the creature full-on. Weakened, the beast fell into the graveyard of Acid Ants like a scrap of paper.

“Ah...”

Although she'd somehow killed the magical beast that had lunged at her, Lady Seren was tipped off balance by the recoil of her attack, her lack of balance in the air, and the barrage of Wind Cutter blades she'd released.

"Lady Seren!"

Lady Seren toppled off the cart but caught herself and was dangling one-handed.

Phew.

I released a breath I hadn't known I was holding. I put up a barrier over the heads of the Acid Ants, but Lady Seren had a firm grip and didn't seem to be in immediate danger of falling.

But those slender arms couldn't support her weight indefinitely. *This situation can't go on for much longer.* As I thought that, something wriggled creepily in the corner of my eye.

An Acid Ant!

The surviving Acid Ants climbed toward Lady Seren along the trunk of the tree. Before I realized what I was doing, I began climbing.

"Lady Seren! Not yet!"

Lady Seren, unable to move, was a sitting duck. I couldn't help myself. I stretched my hand skyward, preparing to conjure flame.

"Lord Viol! Please, wait!"

Hearing Lady Seren's voice, I stopped at the last moment.

"I will do it myself!"

As she yelled, Lady Seren fired off a Wind Cutter spell, even as she dangled from the cart by one arm in a most precarious position.

"Woah!"

Great stuff. Even while pale in the face, Lady Seren lifted her body with a gust of wind and lightly jumped onto the cart, securing a foothold.

Still dodging the Acid Ants that flew through the trees and down in mid-air, she descended, battling as she went.

The ground Lady Seren was looking down on was, by now, littered with the corpses of multiple Acid Ants.

The Acid Ants, realizing their disadvantage, began to retreat.

Their numbers were steadily declining. Only two or three were left. Then, those were also dispatched by her Wind Cutter as Lady Seren slowly came to join me. She must have remembered how, last time, I warned her not to let a wounded beast live.

Ultimately, Lady Seren killed over thirty Acid Ants and a mystery magical beast in a surprisingly short time.

I was surprised when I looked at my most devoted protégée. Her face was so drawn and tense as to imply the brave fighting from just before had been merely an illusion.

“Please climb aboard, Lord Viol. I don’t want to remain in this place any longer...” she said, her voice a tad shaky.

“I understand.”

Of course, this must have shaken her mentally. It seemed better to leave as soon as possible. The cart still floated slightly, and I jumped on behind Lady Seren. Despite her exhausted expression, she still adjusted the balance and weight with a firm hand.

We passed through the forest with a lot of momentum. No doubt she was keen to get away from this place. The cart soared high above the trees. *Ah, yes; at this altitude, we would be less likely to be attacked by magical beasts.*

When I looked at her, Lady Seren’s shoulders and hands were trembling. Her head was hanging as if she wanted to hide her face, and I could not see her expression.

“Well done.”

Trembling shoulders were a natural response after such a battle. I spoke to her calmly, and when I gave her a light tap on the shoulder, I could see her hands gripping the hem of her skirt.

She was trying to come to terms with her fears. While I knew this was the

best thing all around, I still felt a sense of detached loneliness.

“That was a rather good display of fighting. I apologize for shouting out. I think you’d have no issue passing if you turned in a Recording Orb of that battle.”

Even if I hadn’t called her attention to the attacking beasts, Lady Seren had already cast a protective wall. Things could have gone bad after that, but ultimately, she’d had the situation well in hand.

I need an iron will to keep my mouth shut. Next time, I must not say a word.

“No, it’s okay. I couldn’t see my surroundings because I was so distracted by the ants moving around beneath me. If you hadn’t drawn my attention to the threat, I’m not sure what would have happened.”

“Well, it was a serious swarm,” I said. “Honestly, a normal mage would have lost their life.”

Lady Seren’s head reared up as if my words had repelled her, and she turned back toward me.

It wasn’t an exaggeration. If a mid-ranked mage encountered a crowd of that size alone, it was quite possible they would lose their life. A novice mage would certainly have died.

“A normal mage wouldn’t have had the option of retreating into the sky like you, Lady Seren,” I explained calmly. “Usually, as soon as they’d dispatched the first Ant in the line, the others would swarm before they could even ready a second attack.”

In that sense, it was fortuitous that Lady Seren had learned to fly.

“I understood it better when I saw you dodging the Acid Ants earlier. The useless circling and moving up and down while flying in the forest were all motions you were practicing in anticipation of the battle, weren’t they?” I questioned.

“Oh, I’m... I’m sorry. That must have been uncomfortable for you.”

“There’s no need to apologize. Cutting the branches must have been a test to see if you could use attack magic at the same time, no? You really thought hard

about each and every one of your actions. I'm impressed."

I looked into Lady Seren's eyes as I spoke so she'd know how serious I was. After staring at me, she rewarded me with an adorable, delighted smile.

"It's strange. ...When you praise me like that, Lord Viol, it makes me feel like I can still do my best."

It sounded like she was turning the praise around on me. I felt embarrassed and unsure of what to do. Unlike me, who was at a total loss for words, Lady Seren had perked up and treated me to her best, most beaming smile.

"Thank you, Lord Viol. I will do my best!"

"Ah, yes. But, er... Don't overdo things."

"I won't! Oh, that's right, we were looking for a place to eat. I'll find a good spot as soon as I can."

Lady Seren resumed our journey through the sky with a bright smile. It was hard to believe she'd been trembling until a few moments ago. The flight felt stable in the air, and I felt comfortable leaving the controls up to her.

The fight against the Acid Ants had certainly warmed her up.



THAT day, we flew all around the forest in search of mid-ranking magical beasts, ultimately obtaining four submission-level Recording Orbs.

Even I was a little shocked.

After a full day of monster subjugation, I visited Lady Seren's chambers in Vi form. While she carefully wiped my feet, I was at a loss as to how to start the conversation.

Because, in truth, I couldn't teach her much at the moment. She'd shown she could pass the magical beast subjugation requirement, which we'd thought would be the most difficult. And after all, the practical test involved in the exam was simply a test of one's stamina. Candidates were tasked with maintaining a protective barrier for an extended period of time at a strength and thickness specified by the examiner.

It's the most vital test for a High Mage, whose main mission is to keep the magic barrier up for extended periods. As such, it's difficult to pass. People skilled at offensive magic to the extent that they can subdue mid-ranked magical beasts by themselves have excellent instantaneous power but aren't good at endurance-type magic.

However, Lady Seren was rather good at this, too. A few tips and pointers would be more than enough.

No, it was a completely different matter that bothered me now.

Seren 21

Vi's True Identity

“AND then, Vi, the last magical beast I defeated was a lizard twice as big as me. I half wondered if it might have been a dragon. It was SO scary!”

“Hmm...”

“Oh, come on! Are you listening, Vi?”

“Hmm. Mmm... Yes. Yes, I’m listening.”

Vi had been averting his gaze for a while restlessly. His tail kept whacking against the table. I knew something was up with him.

“Hey Vi, what’s wrong? Are you feeling unwell? Or is something upsetting you?”

“Upsetting me...? Well...”

“If you’d like, I’d be happy to talk it out with you. You’ve been helping me for so long now. I wonder if I can help you, too.”

Maybe I wouldn’t be able to help much, but I wanted to do whatever I could for Vi and Lord Viol. I slowly stroked Vi’s back to encourage him, and he raised his head with a determined look. It was so cute, those pitch-black eyes looking straight at me. I had to suppress an urge to tweak his tiny nose.

“There is something I have been meaning to say once you’d succeeded in subjugating a magical beast.”

“What is it? You seem to be having trouble getting it out?”

Vi’s ears drooped uncharacteristically. It made me feel a twinge of pity. I wanted to cheer him up, so I offered him something sweet.

“You don’t have to force it, though. Shall we have a snack first?” I asked.

“No, it’s a serious thing I want to discuss. Now is not the time for eating sweets.”

“Is that so?”

I couldn’t believe it. Vi, refusing sweets!

What could this important discussion possibly be about? Now I was nervous, too. The beast subjugation went well today, so I doubted I was in for a scolding.

“Lady Seren,” he began.

“Yes?”

“Each individual recording of beast subjugation you made today is more than enough to qualify for entry. As long as you bring it to the reception, you will definitely receive a notification of acceptance.”

“What, really?! Do you think so, too? Lord Viol said the same thing. I didn’t think it would go so well, but I guess it’s all down to the efforts of you and Lord Viol! I can’t thank you enough.”

“No, Lady Seren, it was your hard work that... No, let us put that aside. What I want to say is: Is it really okay for you to enter without telling your family?”

“Well, of course. That’s the best thing to do. I mean, neither Prince Helios nor my father can call for a dissolution of the engagement. If I go off and do it on my own, then no one but me will be responsible. There would be no blame to cast, and no feelings would be hurt.”

“Except as regards you, Lady Seren.”

“Well, it’s still the better outcome for me, too. If I had come to learn of Prince Helios’s feelings after becoming queen, I would have suffered even more because I wouldn’t have been able to change the situation.”

“That’s... Well, that may be true, but...” Vi hesitated.

“I’m prepared to break off my engagement with Prince Helios by force and for the gossip and badmouthing to come my way. Besides, I dream of becoming a High Mage. If I can only become a mage, then at the very least, I’ll be able to secure a livelihood for myself, right? I can shut myself up in the tower and immerse myself in work, and the rumors will disappear someday.”

I knew Vi was worried about me, but I'd come to this decision after thinking long and hard about it. Knowing this was the best way to avoid inconveniencing others, I had focused hard on achieving my goal.

But Vi suddenly lowered his gaze to his forepaws and murmured, "But won't your family be saddened?"

"Pardon?"

"I think, Lady Seren, that you must have a good relationship with your younger sister and servants. Your father's reputation may remain intact this way, but when they realize you made this choice without consulting them... Will it not pain them?"

"Well... I..."

Certainly, it would make Father and Mother sad. Marietta might cry or get angry. However, in the current uncertain situation, if I told them the truth, they would not only be sad, but I would place a burden on them to come up with a response.

Forcing me to marry or advising the royal family to cancel the engagement... No doubt, either way, Father would suffer terribly to have to make that kind of choice.

"Well, depending on the personality of the person listening, sometimes one's true intent gets lost and results in a breakdown in communication. It's hardly my place to tell you what to do..." Vi said. "But if possible, I think it would be best to maintain a good relationship with your family even after you have fulfilled your wish and become a High Mage."

I couldn't believe Vi was thinking about things like that. I felt deeply moved, and my heart almost trembled. Words of gratitude spilled naturally from my lips.

"Thank you, Vi..."

But as I spoke his name, Vi lifted his face as if repelled.

For some reason, he made a bitter face, opening and closing his mouth several times. Then Vi finally looked straight at me, speaking in a firm, resolute

voice.

“Actually, there’s something I wanted to confide in you about, Lady Seren.”

“Hmm?”

“I knew I’d have to say it someday, but I couldn’t bring myself to do so, not for a long time.”

“Oh my. Well, what is it?”

Seeing the cat’s face become even more solemn than before, all I could do was stare and wait.

“I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t be too surprised...”

With an apologetic look on his face, Vi gazed up at me. Then, as he jumped silently off the table onto the floor, his figure shimmered like a mirage.

An optical illusion?

I blinked hard, taken aback.

In an instant, the black cat’s appearance increased in size, and black boots appeared where I was looking at the floor.

What happened?

Where’s Vi?

Confused, I looked up at the owner of the black boots who’d suddenly appeared in front of me, and I sucked in a surprised breath.

“Lady Seren...”

“What...? Lord... Lord Viol?”



What is he doing here?

When?

Why?

And where did Vi go?

Questions popped into my head, but I was so surprised that Lord Viol was suddenly in the room that I couldn't even speak.

Lord Viol looked down at me with dark eyes that seemed to draw me in. His brows were furrowed, making him look guilty and melancholy as if he'd been subjected to intense verbal persecution.

I was shocked, but when I saw Lord Viol's sad face, I just wanted to comfort him, even though I had no idea what was happening.

"Since I was advising you to tell the truth, Lady Seren, I thought I should as well," he said.

"Right... Okay..."

"Above all, I want you to know the truth. The thing is, I..." Lord Viol hesitated, trying to find the right words. After a moment's hesitation, he slowly continued. "I want to be someone worthy of your trust."

"Goodness. You already are," I said at once.

"Is... Is that really true?"

"Of course it is." I nodded firmly at Lord Viol, who still seemed uneasy.

"Good. I thought you'd be shocked to discover that Vi, the familiar with whom you've long been acquainted, was really me. I was worried you'd say that you never wanted to see me again. But you're tough, Lady Seren."

"Pardon?"

"Hmm?"

"What did you just say?"

Feeling like I'd just heard something I couldn't ignore, I hurriedly asked for confirmation.

“Oh. I praised you for your toughness. I hope that didn’t offend you?”

“No! That thing you said about Vi.”

“Oh, right. I AM Vi.”

“Whaaat???!!!”

“?!!!”

I covered my mouth, embarrassed by my shriek, but it was probably too late. Seeing Lord Viol’s astonished look, I realized my mistake and strained to listen while clutching my chest and mouth.

Surprisingly, there was no noise in the mansion and no sound of someone coming running.

Lord Viol also listened quietly with an intense expression, but before long, he relaxed, looking relieved.

“Lady Seren, what a loud shriek you have. If I hadn’t cast an audible cloaking spell in advance, I might have been arrested.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just... Is it true? I mean, truly?”

“It is true. See?” he murmured, then Lord Viol disappeared, and the familiar cute little black cat appeared again.

“Vi!!! Oh, so it IS true?!”

“Why did that surprise you? You just saw me switch from cat to human form mere moments ago.”

“Well, I mean...it’s so amazing! It never occurred to me that a person could take the form of a cat. You really are amazing, Vi!” After instinctively crouching and stroking his small head, I suddenly paused, my hand in midair. “Oh, I’m sorry. A force of habit.”

“I don’t mind. I’m used to it by now. Anyway, I’m glad you don’t harbor any hatred towards me for my slight deception.”

“Well, it’s impossible for me to hate you. ...Simply impossible,” I repeated. “But I always thought you were a real black cat, so I couldn’t help being taken aback.”

“I WAS just like a cat, wasn’t I?” he laughed. “You know, I did a lot of special training for it.” Speaking a little pridefully, Vi preened. Try as I might, I couldn’t see him as anything other than a splendid example of the feline race. “I revealed my identity in order to talk about something important, but on the contrary, it seemed to be more of a distraction. I’m sorry.”

Hearing that, I remembered the question Lord Viol had posed to me.

Although for me, my thoughts never wavered from the time I first made the decision to become a High Mage. After carefully listening to what Lord Viol said, maybe I should seriously consider it again.

But right now, I couldn’t. I didn’t feel as if I could gather my thoughts.

“Yes... That’s true. The impact of your revelation is so strong for me that my brain feels muddled. Is it okay if we talk about it tomorrow?” I asked.

“Right. I, too, am exhausted after all the tension. I feel quite weak now that it’s out there.”

Even Lord Viol gets nervous sometimes, I thought and realized I was staring at him when he averted his face.

His adorable side profile... I could see Lord Viol’s embarrassed expression in that cute cat face.

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” he said. “There’s also the matter of your ongoing lessons. Let us talk at length again tomorrow when we’re calmer.”

“Yes, Lord Viol.”

“When I’m in this form, just Vi is fine.”

“Oh, I couldn’t...”

“You don’t need to worry about something as trivial as a name. Besides, it wouldn’t do for a servant to come along and hear you address a cat as Lord Viol.”

Lord Viol was right, but it felt rude to call him Vi, knowing it was Lord Viol inside that cat skin.

“I think it will be difficult for me, knowing it’s you, Lord Viol,” I told him.

“You’ll just have to get used to it. Do your best.”

His casual response made me chuckle wryly. Lord Viol had already made up his mind on the matter.

“...All right. I’ll do my best, Vi.”

“Good. That’s how it should be.”

“Hehe.”

The side profile, with him nodding and his expression relaxed, was that of a cat. The word “cute” danced on the tip of my tongue, but I held back from saying it. Even in cat form, he was so cool... But I couldn’t prevent my lips from curving into a smile as I observed Lord Viol in all his adorableness.

“I shall return home, then. Lady Seren, you ought to get a good rest tonight.”

“Oh...”

“What’s wrong?”

“I forgot the sweets. Would you like to bring them home?”

Lord Viol had forgotten, too. However, as soon as he heard the word “sweets,” his desire to eat seemed to swell up out of nowhere, and his eyes were glued to the basket placed by my bedside. A few moments later, he spoke in a small, strained voice.

“...May I?”

“But of course.”

“Sorry to trouble you. Thank you very much.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

I quickly fetched the basket and opened it up. The sweet scent of caramel wafted out, gently tickling my nose. I lifted out today’s dessert. Cookies—relatively simple-looking ones. I wondered if the caramel was kneaded into the dough.

They were small and light, making them easy to take home, which was a relief.

I wrapped the cookies in a handkerchief for him, and he sniffed them with a blissful look. *Lord Viol really loves sweets.*

“Ah, it smells like it’s guaranteed to be delicious today as well...” he said hungrily.

The adorable black cat disappeared into the darkness of the night, carefully carrying the sweets he so loved. After seeing him off and getting changed, I went to bed as Lord Viol had ordered.

The magical beast subjugation, which I thought would be terribly difficult, had gone really well. *It might do me some good to have an early night tonight.*

After a full day of triumphs, danger, and beast subjugation, all I could think of as I lay in bed was the shocking truth I’d just learned.

I’d always thought they seemed alike, but I never would have guessed Vi was Lord Viol himself. I thought he was just a rational, smart, and reliable cat.

Giggling to myself, happiness welled inside me as I thought about that adorable cat.

I couldn’t see him as anything but a cute feline who stretched, napped, and purred, but when it came to teaching magic, he was a wonderful teacher. He explained things clearly, guided me, and encouraged me whenever I felt down.

He scolded me firmly when I needed it. And when strange men in the city surrounded me, he protected me and fought without flinching.

Come to think of it, he even listened to my trivial stories as though he were amazed. Even if it looked like he was curtly turning his face away, his ears were always pointed firmly in my direction.

I could tell he was listening to me seriously by the way his ears twitched. And he always ate the sweets I prepared with relish and joy. Those moments were always soothing to me.

Curt but kind, cute, brave, dependable, and always sincere... A cat who loves sweets.

And it was Lord Viol all along.

When I tried to replace the memories of Vi with Lord Viol in my mind, I

suddenly remembered something.

Hold on. I had tweaked Vi's nose and nuzzled his cheeks. Even though he didn't like it, I forcibly wiped his paws and hugged him tightly. And even worse... I had been rubbing... And stroking...all over his furry body. And I... I ended up telling Vi a lot of secrets. About how I thought Lord Viol was so kind, wonderful, and cool... Yes, I'd said all that...

As soon as I realized that, I became more and more embarrassed, and my body grew so hot that I thought I'd sprung a fever.

My face was burning.

My heart pounded.

As I writhed in bed, I knew my face had to be bright red.

Oh, help.

Help.

Help!

Alone in bed, I hugged my pillow and buried my face in it as I listened to the sound of my racing heart. It sounded like it was about to beat right out of my chest.

Oh, whatever am I going to do?

How am I going to face Lord Viol tomorrow...?



I had another sleepless night...

What's more, while I was writhing around in bed thinking, my bedtime came and went, and I couldn't even magically exhaust myself. I felt most pathetic, but it was my own fault, really. The only salvation was that I didn't keep Vi up all night with me as I'd done during our special training.

Ah, right. Vi was Lord Viol all along... Wait a minute. Does that mean I was forcing Lord Viol to stay up all night with me?

Speaking of Lord Viol, it's no exaggeration to say that he devotes his life to his work. He's a member of the Mage Guild and works hard maintaining the border

wall and pioneering new magics. Not only did he spend so much of his precious time on me, but I also forced him to stay up all night long...!

Come to think of it, Vi... I mean, Lord Viol didn't ever complain. Even though he scolded me for overdoing it sometimes, he always encouraged and praised me.

Both Vi and Lord Viol have the same attitude in that respect.

I again felt the depth and kindness of his generosity, and remembering Lord Viol's calm face, my face reddened slightly again.

While waiting for Lord Viol to visit my chambers, I kept thinking and thinking about it. The more I remembered, the more unbearable it became. At this rate, by the time Lord Viol arrived, my heart would stop beating from embarrassment and guilt.

Covering my face with both hands, I flung myself down on the table, and as I sat there wiggling my legs anxiously, I heard a tapping at the window. Looking out, a black cat stared at me with a dubious expression. The tip of his tail was curled up and swayed slowly in the air as if pondering something.

So cute...! But no, it's Lord Viol. Lord Viol!

"What are you doing?" he asked in that deep voice of his.

"N-Nothing! Lord Viol, you're a little later than usual today."

"I told you, you can call me Vi. I believe I said that would be safer."

He certainly did, but even so...!

"But, when I thought back on various things last night, I realized that I've caused you a lot of trouble, and also... I've done a lot of rude things... I'm so sorry...!!!" I apologized sincerely.

"...Ah, I see."

Lord Viol looked surprised, and then I felt like he was grinning for some reason. Even on a black cat, I could recognize the expression.

"Then do I have to have my feet wiped today? Until now, I never had a say in the matter." I could hear the smile in his voice.

"I... I think I should probably still wipe them," I muttered.

Rince would scold me for sure otherwise. I grabbed a wet handkerchief, but once it was in my hand, I hesitated to use it. I couldn't quite bring myself to forcefully hold him in my arms and wipe his paws like I used to.

In the beginning, when Vi struggled against the wiping or my embraces... Only now did I realize why he wanted to escape. This was far too embarrassing...!

"Yesterday, you looked calm, but now you suddenly look flustered. You're making me feel embarrassed now," he said.

I gasped.

I look flustered? What kind of face am I making?!

When I spun around in a hurry and looked at the dresser mirror, I saw myself with a bright red face clutching a handkerchief.

"Don't worry about that now. I wasn't sure how to react at first, but I'm used to it now. Humans are surprisingly adaptable creatures, after all."

Admonishing me in the cool, reserved voice of Lord Viol, the black cat jumped lightly onto the table. His paws didn't even make a sound.

He certainly seemed used to it. Lord Viol stretched his body like a cat on the table, then sat down neatly. Then he thrust his right forepaw in my direction.

"This way isn't so embarrassing, is it? I wouldn't want you getting in trouble, so wipe away," he said.

"Th-Then, excuse me...!"

Respectfully picking up Lord Viol's forepaw, lustrous and beautiful down to the fur, I carefully wiped his toes. Thinking that these cute, slender, black forelimbs were also Lord Viol's, I felt a little too timid to hold on to them tightly, and so I wasn't able to do much of a firm job.

Wiping between the tiny toe beans, cleaning the delicate little claws... I felt so embarrassed I thought I might faint.

How had I managed to wipe off these paws without a second thought every time up until now?

Deep within the black eyes of the black cat staring intently as I wiped its paws,

I could see Lord Viol's handsome face. In my heart, I desperately thought, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry!* Over and over again.

At first, I was nervous and couldn't stop my hands from trembling, but with Lord Viol's assistance, I wiped his paws in order, starting with the right forepaw, and by the time I wiped the left hind foot, I'd gradually calmed down and was regaining my composure.

After all, even if I knew it was Lord Viol inside, a cute cat is still a cute cat.

The paws were still pink and soft, and the fur was velvety smooth. I'd gotten used to how he felt, and touching him now brought the same soothing sensation it always had.

In spite of his poker face, he was cooperative today in helping me wipe his limbs, which he always seemed to hate so much. No doubt he was acting out of consideration for my feelings.

That casual consideration and the tail gently smacking against my hand... They were both so typical of Vi. The Vi with whom I'd spent so much time over the past two months.

It might be Lord Viol inside, but Vi was still the same sweet Vi I'd grown to know.

Perhaps I shouldn't worry about this more than is absolutely necessary, I thought to myself.

Viol 20

Her Decision

“Vi...?”

“What?”

Lady Seren spoke to me in a small, searching voice.

It took me nearly two months to get used to this dynamic, but Lady Seren only learned the truth yesterday. It was only natural for her to be confused. I replied in my usual tone, hoping to make her feel more at ease, to which she nodded several times as if confirming something.

“That’s right. I should say ‘Vi,’ shouldn’t I?”

“That’s the most natural choice, yes.”

“Even though you’re Lord Viol, it’s all right for me to call you Vi, still... Right?”

I’m no actor. I’d been planning to be myself with her from now on. Even after revealing my true identity, I had no intention of changing my attitude.

“Of course. I’m not changing how I am or the way I speak just because I’m in cat form. Cat or a human, I’m still myself,” I said.

“That cute cat form... Is it really you...?” She sounded unsure.

“If I look cute, it’s simply because I happen to be in the form of a cat. An adorable house pet.”

“Hehe, well, I can’t deny that.”

Lady Seren’s smile seemed loaded with hidden meaning. But at any rate, I was glad to see that she had gotten her emotions in order.

“Well, for the past few months, you and I have been communicating while I’ve been Vi,” I began. “I was delighted to have the opportunity to discuss many things with you. So, if you could act as you always have towards me as Vi, that would be a big help. Although, I understand that may be difficult.”

“...I’ll try!”

Lady Seren's delighted laugh struck me as odd for a second, but from her gaze, I understood her feelings. A little embarrassed by the speech I'd just made, my tail whacked unconsciously against the table.

I suppose it made sense with the expression on Lady Seren's face.

After allowing her gaze to drift away from my swaying tail, her desire to pet me apparent on her face, Lady Seren eventually tilted her head to one side and spoke awkwardly.

"Um... Are you angry about all of the...petting?"

I couldn't help smiling. So she was worried about that, was she? After all that shameless petting she'd indulged in, too.

"I dislike people, so at first, I found it unpleasant," I admitted. "But when I asked you to stop, you continued to fluff and pet my fur, bringing your face close to me to the point where I felt most uncomfortable."

"I'm... I'm so sorry!" she cried.

"But I acclimated quickly. You looked so happy, Lady Seren, whenever you were stroking me. I must say, now I don't mind it one bit."

"You... You don't mind it? Really?"

Her eyebrows, previously drooping dejectedly, now formed pleased, surprised arches. Seeing the look of relief on her face lifted my spirits, too.

If stroking me brought her peace and calm, then I could stand a little embarrassment. In fact, I'd be happy for her to keep petting and stroking as long as it made her smile.

"Besides, Lady Seren, you are very skilled at petting. It felt quite good at times."

"Oh, Vi...!" she gushed.

"Ah, but please don't spend more time studying cat petting techniques. I would not like to lose myself in feline ecstasy. Nor would I like for you to see me come undone." I said it facetiously so as not to make her feel any more guilty than necessary, and Lady Seren's expression suddenly brightened.

“Well, if it felt good, then I’m glad I spent time studying it. Say, Vi...”

“What?”

“I have a favor to ask, but...”

Lady Seren interlaced her fingers before her lips and mumbled as if struggling to get the words out. Despite my face being below hers, she looked down at me entreatingly. A crafty girl, she was. And quite adorable, too.

I’d seen her this way before. And so, I knew what she wanted to ask.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself.

“Can I still pet you sometimes? Only sometimes! Just like I used to...?” she implored.

“Fine. I shall not fuss over a little petting.”

“Oh, truly?!”

“Woah!”

Lady Seren’s face lit up with a smile, and she lifted me into the air with both hands. For a moment, it seemed she was about to embrace me. But she gasped and placed me back on the table.

“I-I’m so sorry. I got carried away...”

“As I said, a little petting is fine.”

“Then please excuse me.”

Swallowing audibly, she reached for me with a tentative hand.

Using her small palm, she stroked me slowly from forehead to tail. My ears flicked reflexively as if repelling water droplets. Seeing my reaction, Lady Seren smiled and narrowed her eyes happily.

“So cute...”

Unavoidable, I suppose. Of course, cats are cute. Be they stray or house pets, all cats are cute.

Mid-stroke, Lady Seren brought her face close to mine as if attracted by a magnet. I panicked and stiffened.

“Lady Seren, it’s embarrassing when your face is close,” I said.

“I’m... I’m sorry!”

Lady Seren leaped back and reminded herself in a chant, “Vi is Lord Viol, Vi is Lord Viol.” *Most amusing.* Her ears were still red. No doubt she would soon grow bolder, though, and the day wouldn’t be far off when I’d find myself with paws wiped and fur well-stroked again.

But either way, she seemed to have accepted the truth, and that was fine by me.

I invited Lady Seren to have a sip of tea, and once she regained her composure, I began saying what I had to say.

“Lady Seren, by the way, there is something I wanted to talk to you about today.”

“...Yes. Oh, yes, of course. Lady Seren slowly lifted her face. She wore a tighter expression than before. “You wanted to talk about whether or not I should tell my father and the others about my plans before taking the High Mage exam, right?”

“Yes. I think you should give it serious consideration again.”

Lady Seren looked troubled, then spoke as if something had just come to her. “Hey, Vi, why do you insist I speak to my family about this? Is there some specific reason?”

“I told you the reason yesterday. ...But I’m sure what you want is something more tangible. A reason why I, specifically, think you should treasure your relationship with your family a little more, correct?”

After thinking for a while, I slowly opened my mouth.

“It’s because when I decided to become a Mage, I made my father angry with my shallow thinking.”

“Oh, my.”

Lady Seren looked taken aback and then asked if this was really something she ought to know. I had never spoken to anyone about this, but it struck me as a story that Lady Seren needed to hear.

Recalling the old memory, my ears drooped, and I nodded.



ON that fateful day, a well-dressed old man and a young man dressed like a Mage approached me. After they gave me a sweet treat, they heaped praise on me, and just like that, I was scouted. And I was on cloud nine.

So, as soon as I got home, the first thing I said was this:

“Father! Mother! I will become a Mage!”

“Huh? What is this child raving about, all of a sudden?”

“Where did you hear the word Mage? Our kind have no connection to that sort of thing.”

Of course, my father and mother laughed at me, and my brothers were dumbfounded because they didn’t understand what was going on.

“This splendid gentleman Mage asked me if I wanted to become a Mage in town today.”

“Huh? Don’t be silly. Why would they want you?”

“I have a lot of magical power, they said.”

In fact, that old man was my predecessor, the Archmage of the Third Mage Guild, but at the time, I didn’t know that. As far as I was concerned, he was simply a kind old man who praised me and gave me delicious food.

But the old man had carefully explained it to me in as simple terms as possible, and when I tried my best to explain to my father and mother, they gradually listened to me with serious expressions.

Naturally, they probably thought the explanation was too detailed to be a fictional story I had dreamed up.

“So, the old man said he wanted to talk directly to you both tomorrow, so I showed him the way to our house, okay?”

“You... Without permission, you did such a thing... And he’s coming here?”

“Yes, because my magical power is amazing, and the old man said he would let me into a magic school for free. He said he’d come to explain everything.”

“A magic school... But that’s the sort of place elites go.”

“Wait, wait, wait; you’ve never once thought of being a Mage until now. Is it really right for you to decide so recklessly? Think carefully, now.”

“I’ve thought it all through! I don’t really care what I do for work. This year’s crops were bad, and we’re all suffering, so if I get into this school, I can live in the dormitory, and it will lessen the food burden for the rest of the family.”

The moment I said that, a hand flashed out and slapped me.

“Don’t talk such nonsense!”

“Ouch... Wh-What? What was that for?”

It was rare for my father to hit me, so my feelings of buoyancy withered away in an instant.

“Don’t talk so shamefully! Yes, things are tight right now, but sell my child? Never! I’m working as a day laborer to feed the family, expressly to avoid having to resort to things like that!”

“Dearest...!”

“Father...”

My father, who by right should have been angry, had a sad look in his eyes, and I realized my mistake.

“If you enter the magic school on a whim, you won’t ever become anything but a Low Mage. If you don’t really and truly want to do it, you’ll get no blessing from me.”

With that, Father shut himself up in his bedroom without eating, and I was at a loss for anything to say.

Long rains ruined the vegetables we had planted with great care and the fields where new varieties of crops were being bred, and it was an extremely poor year with less than 30 percent of the usual yield.

Even so, I wanted to ease the burden on my father, who earned money by working as a day laborer to support the family without complaining. However, as a mere child, my thoughts were immature, and my careless words must have

hurt my father's pride. He was a man who was determined to feed his wife and children, no matter what.

"You shouldn't have said all that, Viol."

"I'm sorry."

"Apologize properly tomorrow."

I just nodded in response.

My brothers seemed worried, too. At the lonely dinner table, without my father, the food had no taste.

"Your father isn't trying to blindly stop you from becoming a Mage. He's simply telling you to think for yourself, not for the sake of your family."

"Yes... I know."

After thinking about it all night, I seriously decided to become a Mage. So, I spoke to my father, and with newfound determination, I entered the Magic Academy.

Since then, I've worked hard to become the best Mage ever. This story might be an embarrassing and pathetic memory from when I was a kid, but if it wasn't for that conversation, I wouldn't be who I am today.



LADY Seren gave me a gentle smile when I concluded my story.

"So you had an origin story, too. A reason why you decided to become a Mage."

"Yes, but this was my experience, so I'm not going to say yours is necessarily the same."

I spoke as calmly and slowly as possible. I didn't want to force my opinions on her. On the other hand, I thought it was necessary to raise the issue.

"Of course, I asked if you were sure you didn't want to talk to your parents about this because of my own experience, but... You see, even if you're thinking of what's best for them, as I was as a young boy, that doesn't always mean it's the best way, does it?"

“...Hmm, perhaps not.”

“At that time, I learned parents look at things from many different angles compared to how their children see things, and they are always thinking about their children’s future. However...”

I paused there, and Lady Seren looked at me worriedly. To reassure her, I gently placed my forepaw on that white hand. With my paw, I softly pressed Lady Seren’s skin, and her expression softened a little.

Holding eye contact with her, I continued softly. “...However, parents are human, too, with different personalities and values. I am well aware that household circumstances are very different between commoners and nobles. Disclosure being the right path depends on the individual family. But most of all, it depends on what you want to cherish, Lady Seren.”

“What I want to cherish...?”

“Originally, you decided to become a High Mage for the sake of Prince Helios, correct? And the fact that you did not confide in your family was out of respect for your family’s social position.”

“Yes, you’re quite right there.”

“But, what about now?”

In response to my question, Lady Seren made a face that indicated she didn’t know why I was asking.

“This is an unsophisticated way of putting it, but your current method is all about doing it ‘at any cost.’ No matter what anyone says or what happens, you want to become a High Mage at any cost. And what you are doing now is the method that works best for that.”

As long as she could become a High Mage, it didn’t matter what anyone said. After that, her life would be one long party.

“However, if you just want to break off the engagement, there are other ways to solve it, right? So you could still talk to your father about it. At least that way, your father would have a choice in the matter.”

“Certainly, Father would have choices. He could move to break off the

engagement. Or he could forbid me from doing what I want to do. Alternatively, he could wait and watch as I become a High Mage.”

“And if you simply want to grant Prince Helios his genuine wish, now would be the time to mention your true feelings.”

“How so...?”

“You already have the trump card in your back pocket. Becoming a High Mage. If you tell him there is a sure way to break off the engagement, you might be able to figure out who Prince Helios really wants to be his wife.”

Lady Seren’s face stiffened. Just imagining what response might come was enough to cause a nervous stomachache. But this had to be confirmed. Carefully, I spoke again.

“Lady Seren, you have outstanding potential as a High Mage, and to be honest, as a Mage Guild leader, you’re exactly the kind of person I want... I believe your work will greatly contribute to the development of new magic tools.”

“Are... Are you serious?”

“Absolutely. Besides, I personally would be happy if you became a High Mage. These two months have been a lot of fun.”

“Oh, Lord Viol...!”

Lady Seren beamed, and a desire to continue seeing that smile up close filled me. Even so, as the current Archmage of the Third Mage Guild, I had to say something.

“However, once an elite Mage takes on the task, they cannot easily resign. ...It is a profession that also includes a unique set of inconveniences. It’s too restrictive a career to choose simply to fulfill someone else’s wishes.”

Some grew mentally ill from the strain. It was rare to have the patience to keep the magic barrier up for a long time. Or to have the imagination to create new magic and magical tools. Or the combat power to engage in deadly battles with powerful magical beasts. And yet, I did not feel much stress from all the hard work. I guess it’s a kind of talent or calling.

“If you just want to cancel the engagement and fulfill whatever wishes Prince Helios has, you don’t have to force yourself to become a High Mage,” I told her.

“I’m not forcing myself.”

Actually, she forces herself so much that it wouldn’t surprise me if she lost the ability to identify when she was forcing herself. I wanted to point that out, but again... I doubted if she’d be able to see it.

Still, I wanted her to focus only on her feelings and think seriously about this life-altering decision. This would doubtlessly prove to be a significant crossroads in her life.

“It’s your life,” I said. “You should choose the path you want to go down the most ...And I will do my best to support you. Please think about it all seriously once more.”

After staring at me with her eyes wide open, she gave me a small smile. Her downturned eyes were soft.

“Everything you say is pure Lord Viol, but I simply can’t see you as anyone else but Vi.”

Well, there was nothing to be done about that. I could not appear in Lord Viol’s form in this room.

I thought we were talking seriously, but now I was disappointed, my whiskers twitching. After gently stroking my head and around my ears with her palm, Lady Seren spoke again in a gentle tone.

“I’m not sure what to do.”

She smiled wryly at me. Then, gazing away from me and looking out the window, she kept stroking me silently.

Finally, she continued in subdued tones.

“...I’m not ready to confront Father, let alone Prince Helios...”

I looked up at her in concern, but she kept staring out the window and did not meet my gaze. However, there seemed to be a gentle smile on her lips.

“At first, I felt really sorry toward Prince Helios, and all I could think of were

ways to lessen his burden, you know? But... I think I've changed a lot in the last two months."

Certainly, Lady Seren had changed.

Lately, the pinched, stressed look she'd worn on her face when we first met had vanished. If you ask me, that was a good thing.

"You're right. Now, Prince Helios might be able to tell me his true feelings," she said. "At first, I thought that if I could take the exam to become a High Mage, I could resolve everything."

Then, finally, she looked at me.

Good. Even though she'd sounded at a loss a few moments ago, I was relieved to see her calm expression.

"However, I'm sure Prince Helios isn't the kind of person who acts solely on personal feelings. I've finished my princess consort training, and so there's a chance he might think about it pragmatically and insist that I'm the right candidate for his bride."

"Excuse me for the euphemistic phrasing, but what you're saying is you don't think there's any possibility of him harboring romantic intent in his heart toward you, correct?"

"I don't think he's ever thought about it. But recently, I feel strongly that he's trying to make a real go of things with me."

Lady Seren cast her gaze up at the shelf in her room. There, I spotted the delicate glass pen with the beautiful purple stem, and I blanched. Yes, indeed. She mentioned it before. A gift from Prince Helios.

Yes. He'd neglected Lady Seren until now, but recently there had been a flurry of attempts to spend quality time with her. I couldn't claim to understand his thinking there.

At the evening party, Prince Helios shot me a glare as we passed. No doubt he did not trust me with Lady Seren. That didn't mean he had any feelings for her himself. Still, that was to my benefit.

"Even if Prince Helios wanted me to be his princess bride, I don't think I would

be able to live up to his wishes. ...Heh, I sound pretty selfish.” Lady Seren smiled softly. “When I realized that Prince Helios had feelings for Marietta... When I realized he didn’t truly want me as his bride, I was so sad I thought I was going to die. I cried so much, grew so depressed...but even after all that, I can no longer imagine living my life as the queen of this country, as Prince Helios’s bride.”

“Lady Seren...”

“No matter what kind of response Prince Helios might give me, I can no longer give up my dream of becoming a High Mage.” Lady Seren spoke in a firm, resolute tone.

My chest filled with warmth. Perhaps her passion had deeply moved me.

“I’ve decided. I’ll submit my entry to the exam board tomorrow. And after that, I’ll tell my father the truth—that I’ve entered the exam and intend to become a High Mage.”

“So, you plan to tell him after all? From the way you’ve been talking, it sounded like you were planning to become a High Mage without informing anybody.”

“I can’t be Prince Helios’s bride anymore. If I fail this year, I want to have another try at taking the High Mage exam again next year.”

“You mean...”

“Yes. I don’t care what it takes. I won’t stop until I’m a High Mage.”

That surprised me. When I looked into them, Lady Seren’s eyes brimmed with a quiet fighting spirit.

At first, she claimed she would give up and get married if she couldn’t become a High Mage. But apparently, Lady Seren had decided not to marry no matter what.

“Even though Prince Helios was the initial catalyst, now I’ve decided for myself that I will not rely on his feelings on the matter,” she declared. “I will leave my father’s household and become a High Mage of my own will. I need to tell Father I’m fully prepared to go my own way.”

“Are you... Are you sure? If it’s not Prince Helios’s will but your own will, won’t it be harder to convince him?”

“That’s true. I was taught that since I was born into a duke’s family, I should be proud to serve the citizens and the country. That’s why I worked so hard on princess consort training. I’m prepared to leave my household, but if I become a High Mage, I can still serve the citizens and the country. Either way, my goals remain unchanged and noble, don’t they?”

“Hmm, I see the logic there. Actually, I think I heard from Borden that your father’s love for new things led him to take up a trade job in a different field from the original family business. Perhaps you will find him surprisingly open-minded...?” I ventured.

“Hehe, you’re well-informed. I’m sure Father will understand, too. But if I am disowned and can’t pass the High Mage exam, I will quit the Academy and continue as an adventurer until the next exam. I could make a living that way since I can fight now and everything.”

“Oh, dear, now you’re talking crazy.”

“Well, Vi, you told me to think it over seriously, and so I have.”

“Well, I suppose it’s not a completely unfeasible plan.”

“Good. By the way, Vi, which Recording Orb do you think I should enter?”

It appeared that Lady Seren had come to an unshakable conclusion. Now she was once again focused on passing the exam. Lady Seren, firm in her conviction to be a High Mage no matter the cost, was a stronger woman than I thought.

“The battle against the Garussulus looked the most flashy, but the battle against the Great Bear is probably the one that will earn you more points and a higher evaluation,” I suggested.

“Thank you. Then, I will submit the Great Bear recording.”

Lady Seren, smiling brightly, no longer showed any hesitation or weakness. I was certain nothing could stop her from achieving her goal of becoming a High Mage.

Her expression, after all, showed such absolute determination.

Seren 22

To Grasp the Future

I tied a single knot in the chain of the Recording Orb I had decided to enter for the exam and wrapped it carefully in a handkerchief. Lord Viol selected this one based on his experience of having seen many battle record entries over the years. This was undoubtedly the Recording Orb with the highest chance of success. If even this wasn't enough to pass, it would mean my abilities were still lacking.

Then I tied two knots on the chain of a second Recording Orb, which Lord Viol had described as depicting a "showy" battle, and stashed it in my pen case. This also counted as physical evidence that proved even I could fight admirably. I had to cherish it.

"When will you speak to your father, Lady Seren?" Vi asked.

"If I have time, perhaps tomorrow night," I said. "I'd like to talk with Father face-to-face before he boards the ship for his next overseas venture."

"Such urgency."

Vi's contemplative comment struck me as odd after our last conversation.

"You're the one who said I should talk to Father, but you look unimpressed," I observed.

"Ah, I was just thinking that I might get in trouble when it comes time to explain how you snuck out of your residence all those times," he sighed.

"Ah, yes. If someone else was complicit, the story would get complicated. I'd like to avoid that as well."

"Indeed."

"However, regarding my covert escapades, I can now fly. So that should work as an excuse, right?" I hoped.

"There's no problem with using that as an excuse, but there's a high possibility the mansion's servants have seen the illusions of you in the library," he pointed out.

“Yes, no doubt someone peeked in on me at least once or twice. It would be tricky if they questioned me about that.”

“Yes. If only you could use illusion spells, that would work out for the best, but that’s a type of water magic. Although, wind magic can certainly pull off something similar,” he said. “...It’s quite difficult to learn, however.”

“I suppose I don’t have time to learn it?” I ventured.

“Even you, Lady Seren, would find it impossible to master in two days.”

If Vi said so, then it must be arduous. Of course, I *was* interested. If I could learn such magic, it would come in handy later. *But if magic won’t work as an excuse, what will?* When I thought about it, I came up with an idea surprisingly quickly.

“Oh yes! I wonder if this would work?” I picked up the Recording Orb I’d just put in my pen case. “Some Recording Orbs have a fixed point of view, right? What if I played back an image of me reading a book?”

Vi stared at me with his round eyes. “Yes, indeed...! That could work.”

“Oh, good.”

“When you live a life that relies on magic, you try to use magic to solve everything. But come to think of it, Recording Orbs are more efficient as an explanation because they don’t require magic at all. Anyone can use them.” Vi seemed so excited; even his tail banged on the table. “It’s the perfect solution! Great thinking, Lady Seren.”

“Hehe, oh, good. I love getting praised by you, Vi.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll bring you a Recording Orb. After classes at the Academy are over, stop by the usual bench before going to the salon. I’ll have it ready.”

I would buy one myself, but since the bounties for the magical beasts I subjugated the other day weren’t redeemed yet, I didn’t have the money on hand. I was disappointed with myself for relying on Lord Viol again, but I was still grateful for his help.

“I’m sorry for relying on you for everything, but...thank you,” I said, expressing how I really felt.

“Hmm, no worries. You’re very earnest. A Recording Orb with a fixed point of view is cheap, so you can say you borrowed it from a friend. I have plenty, anyway, so feel free to use it.”

After that, the contented cat enthusiastically ate today’s sweets, gave me more words of encouragement, and disappeared into the darkness.

After enjoying the night breeze and seeing him off, I crawled into bed and pondered tomorrow’s arrangements.

If I ask Mother and the head butler at breakfast, I should be able to secure time to talk with Father in the near future. And I shouldn’t have any issues getting my entry for the High Mage exam accepted at the Mage Tower. All I have to do is stop by the Mage Tower before going to the salon.

Even though I knew that was true, I still felt nervous and restless.

It’s okay. I’m sure it will all work out.

After all, I had progressed to the point where I’d been told if I worked really hard, I was sure to pass the High Mage exam, a hurdle I’d thought almost insurmountable.

I would never give up grasping for the future I wanted. I would do my best.

As I gazed at the ceiling and tried to get myself fired up, the last thing the cat had told me before he left popped into my head.

“...I pray that the discussion with your father will be calm.”

As he was leaving, he placed his cute paw on the back of my hand and gave me those words of encouragement. The black eyes looking up at me and the ears standing straight up were so cute and soothing.

And the fact that inside was Lord Viol himself gave me even more courage.

Whether I interacted with him as Vi or spent time with him as Lord Viol, he always looked me straight in the eye and met me where I was standing. He was someone I could trust.

Lord Viol said I had what it took to be a High Mage—to develop new magics and new magical tools. I couldn’t imagine anything more reassuring than having him continue to mentor me. I felt no hesitation when I considered the path

ahead.

And above all, I looked forward to it so much I could hardly wait.

There were so many kinds of magic I wanted to try and master. If allowed, I would love to work on magic tools that could convert magic into a form of power even ordinary people could use.

There were so many things I wanted to do, and I was so excited that if I didn't already know about the magical sleep exhaustion trick, I'd be in danger of severe sleep deprivation.

But in the deepest part of my excited heart was a prickle of pain.

I said that I wanted to divert the course of my life from the predetermined Princess Consort path, and I wanted to help Prince Helios realize his true feelings. But in the end, I prioritized my dreams above all else. I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel conflicted about it.

However...

"It's your life. You should choose the path you want to go down the most."

When Lord Viol gave me those words, it helped solidify my resolve.

I never thought I'd choose a path for myself... But for the first time in my life, I've found what I want to do.

Any noble-born person learns to find pride in serving the citizens and the country. For me, it was a way of thinking that was so natural no room was left for doubt.

And ever since I could remember, I was set to be Prince Helios's fiancée, so serving the citizens and the country meant becoming a good queen.

"How can such an idiot become a queen? Poor, poor Prince Helios."

Ever since I was laughed at and mocked because I have a hard time memorizing things, I've worked hard to become a good princess so as not to cause trouble for Prince Helios.

Even though my father and mother told me, "You don't have to push yourself so hard," and Marietta scolded me for damaging my health, I couldn't stop

trying.

Those cruel words must have hurt me more than I thought.

That's why I was so shocked when I heard at the salon that I wasn't fit to be a queen. Even though it was like that when I was a child, too... I didn't realize it until I stopped and seriously examined myself.

How foolish. But I am no longer a child. I have to move past the trauma of those days. Serving the citizens and the country can still be done without becoming queen. I may cause trouble for many people, but... This time, I want to think for myself and forge my own path.

Even if there are difficulties, I know that if I work hard with determination, there's a possibility that a new path will open up.

In bed, I closed my eyes, more determined than ever, and magically exhausted myself to sleep.



THEN the next day, as soon as classes at the Academy ended, I hurriedly left my seat.

With the Recording Orb tucked away in my pocket, I headed for the Mage Tower as planned.

At the reception, some sort of magical tool scanned my magical power, and after filling out a short document, I handed over my Recording Orb. The receptionist looked at my name and glanced at me but didn't ask me any questions.

"We have accepted your entry. We will check your battle record and consider whether you are eligible for the exam. Please return to this reception desk for the results in three days."

After being told that, I was dismissed. It was sort of anticlimactic.

However, it made sense. The High Mage's philosophy was that background did not matter. At any rate, I was relieved that my entry had been accepted without incident, and I dashed back along the path toward the salon.

There was still no black cat on the bench on the way. Relieved that I hadn't

kept him waiting, I took a deep breath and sat on the bench.

After calming down, I felt a warm, fuzzy sensation inside.

...Come to think of it, I first met Lord Viol on this bench.

Happily eating a cupcake, he shot a sharp look at me as soon as our eyes met. It would be rare for him to make such a scary expression now.

If not for that encounter, I would never have turned in my entry. I was really fortunate.

As I was once again grateful for the luck of meeting Lord Viol and for his broad-mindedness in taking on my irrational request, I heard a faint rustle behind me.

“Meow.”

Oh, that’s unusual. For him to meow. But the voice was higher than I’d expect for Lord Viol. Turning, I saw an orange-striped cat sticking its face out of the bush.

“Oh, what a cutie.”

When I held out my hand and waited, it approached me. It was probably used to people. It seemed to be a stray, but what a friendly cat! On top of letting me pet it, it even let me hold it once it got used to me.

I couldn’t help but smile. From now on, I couldn’t casually scoop Vi up anymore. It would be nice if this cat could stand in for him.

“Sorry, I’m late.”

Suddenly, a black cat jumped up next to me.

“Meeew?!!”

Surprised by Vi, the orange-striped cat relaxing on my lap sprang away like a rabbit. I was thinking maybe I could enjoy two cats at once, but my dream was crushed.

“Oh...”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

I sighed, disappointed, and Vi quickly apologized. It was always so cute to see his ears drooping.

“An unavoidable event, I think,” I said.

“I must treat my mentor to a delicious morsel later.”

“Your mentor...?” I tilted my head.

“Yes, that stray cat. He was most useful when I was learning feline body language.”

I laughed. So Lord Viol had studied the movements of that sweet stray.

The thought of Lord Viol solemnly following that orange cat and mirroring its movements made me want to smile.

“However, seeing another cat enjoying your attention vexes me, Lady Seren.”

A silly joke on Vi’s part. My tension from turning in my entry faded in an instant. Vi really had such a soothing presence.

“By the way, Lady Seren, did you successfully complete your entry?” he asked.

“Yes. It was accepted. I was told to come back in a few days to see if I qualified.”

“Hmm, yes, that’s standard fare. I’m glad the person on duty processed you in the usual way.” Vi nodded. For a moment, I felt like I caught a glimpse of his work face. How odd. “Now that you’ve entered without incident, take this.” Muttering that, Vi gave me a fixed-point Recording Orb.

“Thank you. I’ll use it carefully.”

As the preparations proceeded, I felt more and more at ease. Step by step, I was steadily advancing on the path to becoming a High Mage.

“It’s a pity, but I’m afraid I have to go now,” I said sadly.

“Right, right. Work hard at the salon.”

Soothed and more confident than ever, I headed off toward the salon. When I turned around, the black cat was still on the bench, seeing me off.



I raced from the bench to the royal palace.

After all, today I went to the Mage Tower to complete the entry procedures and met and talked with Vi. It was much later than when I usually arrived at the salon.

I propelled myself with wind, just enough not to look unnatural at a glance. Still, I was frustrated with not being able to go even faster. Even though this running speed was normal, I had grown used to relying on magic.

With a wry smile, I reached the door to the salon and caught my breath before entering.

“Sorry, I’m late.”

“Ah, you’re here!”

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

As soon as I opened the door, Lady Linde and Lady Ladia called out to me.

“I’m sorry. You were waiting for me...?” I asked.

“Ah, we were thinking of having some tea. Seren, did you come running? You should rest for a while.” Prince Helios laughed as he spoke.

However, Marietta looked depressed beside him.

Where’s her usual smile? Did something happen?

“Right, we’ll brew the tea.”

“Thank you...”

Lady Linde and Lady Ladia took the initiative to stand up from their seats, and Marietta silently came over to help. I was curious, but I didn’t know if it was okay to ask her what was wrong in front of everyone, so I decided to wait and observe.

Marietta looked downcast, even as she brewed the tea.

Perhaps on the way home, I should try talking to Marietta a little.

Actually, I had a general idea of why Marietta didn’t seem very perky these days. I was sure she was feeling inferior to Lady Linde and Lady Ladia.

Even when she received the same instruction as the others, she was the only one who couldn't understand it. It took her much longer to grasp things. It was only natural that she'd lose her confidence.

I, too, knew how that felt. Painfully so.

But Marietta's case was different from mine. Of course, she would have less specialized knowledge than Lady Linde and Lady Ladia, who wanted to become civil officials. Besides, Marietta was two years younger than us and had less basic knowledge overall, so it was only natural for her to struggle with us as peers.

I had spoken to Marietta about this before. Even though she seemed to understand the situation, her emotions might not have cared about that logic.

Still, Marietta always tried to smile, and as her older sister, I felt both proud of her and confident in her abilities. However, today her expression was clouded over. Perhaps something had happened that upset her while I was away.

However, no one else in the salon seemed much different. They all appeared natural and calm.

"It's been almost half a month since Lady Linde, Lady Ladia, and Marietta joined the salon." After sitting at the round table for the meeting and taking a sip of tea, Prince Helios murmured meaningfully.

"Time's just flown by, hasn't it?" Lady Ladia said.

"I still have a lot to learn, but every day is most fulfilling," Lady Linde agreed wholeheartedly.

Marietta lowered her eyes slightly from her seat beside Lady Ladia and Lady Linde, who had answered brightly.

I couldn't help but worry about her, but it wouldn't be a good idea to question Marietta and draw attention. All the more because the others didn't seem to notice Marietta's gloomy mood.

"It's only been about half a month? Wow. But everyone's picked things up so fast."

"Indeed. In fact, I can scarcely imagine how we ever managed without them."

Lord Kitz and Lord Andel, who would have clearly spoken up if there were any shortcomings to speak of, seemed satisfied with everyone's work. I was glad to know that. And Prince Helios smiled then as if he, too, was reassured.

"The palace seems to hold them in high regard, too. The other day, Prime Minister Borden said he has high hopes for them. He seemed quite giddy."

"Ah yes, he's a stickler for the work, he is."

Lord Andel sounded impressed. Lady Linde and Lady Ladia were smiling happily. However, Marietta still looked gloomy. Worry gnawed at me despite the pleasant conversation.

"If we can prove the power of women this way, and commoners can be more active than they are now, I think this country will be able to utilize more of its latent talents and prosper even further," Prince Helios said.

"That's your dream, isn't it, Prince Helios?" Lord Riesz smiled, and Lord Kitz and Lord Andel smiled, too.

"Well, I'm on board. Good talent is all that matters."

"But, you know, you're a member of the royal family, so your stance is unusual. After all, if the common folk gain influence, it might weaken your position."

"If people with abilities can play an active role, the country will prosper. Any royal family that could be overthrown as a result of that isn't worth having in the first place." Determination filled Prince Helios's eyes.

Prince Helios had already started to change the old traditions of the salon by his own hand. I was certain Prince Helios wasn't just paying lip service. He intended to shake up the establishment and forge something new.

"Once you become king, Prince Helios, this country's meritocracy will evolve rapidly. Still, I'm confident in my own abilities."

"You all can't keep lazing about, you know."

Lord Kitz had spoken jokingly, but Lord Andel took the opportunity to take a jab at Lord Mashlo and the other boys. The four of them had been whispering amongst themselves, but now they sat up straight.

Actually, Lord Mashlo faced off against Lord Andel with a defiant look on his face.

“I have no intention of losing to women or commoners,” he huffed.

“Oh, indeed?”

“It’s true, Mashlo, you’ve suddenly started working hard these days.”

Yes, Lord Mashlo’s behavior had clearly changed.

When Marietta was going to become a member of the salon, the rowdier boys all declared they would change their attitude so that their laziness wouldn’t reflect badly on her. Of the four, Lord Mashlo had made the biggest change.

“The foul old traditions should be done away with, one by one,” Lord Mashlo grumbled darkly.

“Watch it, Mashlo.”

Lord Riesz reprimanded Lord Mashlo. However, Lord Mashlo did not stop there.

“Isn’t it useless to arrange marriages for mere children? Or to raise a girl to be a princess? We should select our future royals only once they have become proper adults,” he insisted.

“Mashlo, that’s enough. We’re talking about human resources right now.”

Lord Riesz’s tone was harsh, but Lord Mashlo glared back at him.

“I *AM* talking about human resources. A princess consort is a splendid human resource. There’s no way to know their true aptitude when they’re just kids. Prince Helios agrees with me, don’t you?”

“It’s certainly difficult to tell at an early age whether someone has the aptitude or not,” Prince Helios responded. “But Seren has already completed the consort education perfectly. It’s hard to say it’s a bad tradition when she stands before us as she is due to her sincere effort since childhood. It would be disrespectful to Seren to say it was all useless.”

“You know, Seren is surprisingly qualified.”

“She’s a rare example.”

Lord Andel and Lord Kitz were quick to back up Prince Helios. I felt proud that these two strict, competent people thought highly of me.

“That’s because Seren worked her heart out on her princess consort training,” Lord Mashlo argued. “It was the result of her extraordinary efforts, living a life where she didn’t even get to sleep at night. But it doesn’t mean she had any aptitude.”

My eyes widened. Lord Mashlo wasn’t backing down, and his words were shocking. But surprisingly, he wasn’t incorrect, so I had no choice but to agree.

“Just like with the promotion of commoners and women, we should change things so that a candidate for the princess consort is only picked AFTER she comes of age and is able to decide for herself. And we should select while considering her abilities. And the wishes of the prince, too, of course,” he said.

“Certainly, that opinion is more mainstream now. The old ways are growing increasingly malleable as the times progress.”

“The average life expectancy has increased considerably, too, so there may be no need to rush to raise a successor.”

Surprisingly, Lord Riesz and Lord Andel agreed with Lord Mashlo’s assertions. This unexpected evolution of the discussion made hope flare in my chest.

Perhaps Lord Mashlo was raising this issue for Marietta and Prince Helios?

Come to think of it, the voice advising Prince Helios to make Marietta his wife that day in the salon was that of Lord Mashlo. Lord Mashlo seemed concerned about Marietta, but was he acting that way to help Prince Helios and Marietta achieve their dreams?

As I sat there, surprised to have seen another side of Lord Mashlo, the prince beside me seemed to be digesting everything everyone had said.

“...What Mashlo said makes sense for making the best use of human resources by emphasizing their intentions and talents rather than relying on their heritage. Still, this is a discussion for the far future.”

Although he was postponing the discussion, Prince Helios seemed on board

with the basic crux of Mashlo's thinking. In regards to Prince Helios's future bride, it would be good if the salon members could share their thoughts on it, too.

"In the next generation, we may do away with the idea of predetermined fiancées. Perhaps Seren or the council members will be called upon to decide. Right, Seren?"

"But... Yes, that is indeed possible," I said. "It is our duty to protect the citizens and the country. Someone to rely upon... Someone to walk the path alongside the king... It's a way of thinking that goes well with the current changes taking place in the salon and the national system in general."

I chose my words carefully.

This conversation just now might help when the time comes for Prince Helios to choose the princess with whom he will walk the path of leadership.

"But in that case, maybe there's no need to wait for the next generation," I said. "After all, there are many talented women in this country now."



WE boarded the carriage to head home. Once it rolled forward, Marietta turned to me with a stern expression. "Sister... What you said earlier... About not needing to wait for the next generation. That could cause misunderstandings, depending on how it's received."

"Misunderstandings? I intended to say that, without being bound by the framework of a fiancée, Prince Helios should be able to welcome whomever he truly wants to walk beside him as a princess in the future. I couldn't say it outright because of my position."

"Why bother saying it at all? No matter how much one wishes, one cannot easily become Prince Helios's bride." With a tearful, frustrated face, Marietta continued, cornering me. "You were so desperate to fulfill your princess consort training, weren't you? Then why would you say something like that? As if it would be simple for you to discard Prince Helios and your country?!"

"That's a terrible thing to say."

Marietta couldn't know the truth. But without knowing my motivations behind giving up on Prince Helios, she simply blamed and hounded me, and it hurt.

"I overheard Prince Helios and Lord Mashlo say that you would be more suitable as a princess than I am, Marietta," I told her.

"What...?"

"I overheard their voices in the salon. I believe you were present at the time."

Marietta looked at me with a startled expression on her face.

"I cried a lot after that, you know? And because I looked so terrible and drained, Lord Viol, who I happened to meet by chance, gave me some magic to help me recover from my fatigue." I smiled a little to lighten the atmosphere. "Since then, I have thought a lot...and I have come to the conclusion I stated earlier. It was not easy to give up everything."

"I'm so sorry, Sister... I never could have imagined you were listening to that."

"It's fine. I understand how you feel, Marietta. That's why I think that this initiative of women participating in the salon is also a good opportunity for you."

"Oh, Sister, I couldn't...!"

"I'm sure you would be far more suitable as Prince Helios's wife, Marietta. You haven't seemed very cheerful lately, but I know you can get past it. You just have to try your very best."



Marietta 3

A Day I Want to Cry

I don't want to go.

I hate myself for thinking that. But whenever I go to the salon, I see how useless I am and get really depressed.

Lady Linde and Lady Ladia, who entered the salon on the same day as me, immediately understood and could express their opinions based on the same instructions I received. But I had to write down the words I didn't understand in my notebook and ask questions later. Only then could I fully grasp what was being discussed. Due to this, I was always one or two steps behind.

My sister said, "Lady Linde and Lady Ladia were originally aiming to become civil officials, so it's only natural that they have basic knowledge already and understand things quickly. You don't have to upset yourself over it." Yes, she always encouraged me, but I couldn't see things in such a positive light.

As my understanding lagged, the difference in the jobs entrusted to me compared to the other ladies increased. Instead of catching up, I felt like the gap between us was widening day by day.

And Lord Mashlo's behavior was odd. The other three younger boys still tried to comfort me when no one was looking, but after I became an official salon member, Lord Mashlo turned cold on me.

Of course, I was actually glad of that, always aware of Prince Helios and the others watching. But everything was so different now that I couldn't get a grip on things emotionally.

I had a tutor, and I studied hard every day. But I was still useless.

I cried all night when I found a pimple on my forehead, probably because I

was so stressed. At least I could hide it with my hair, but it was still so upsetting after all the effort I put into my skincare routine. I was afraid I was no longer myself.

Ever since I was a child, my sister has told me, “You have a wonderful smile, Marietta. Please keep on smiling always.” And so, I did my best to smile no matter what. But these days, I can’t seem to make myself smile. Still, I had no choice but to attend the salons.

I buried my melancholy deep in my chest and went to the salon, but when I opened the door, I was disappointed. My sister hadn’t arrived yet today.

And then, when I saw Prince Helios’s face, sadness welled up inside me again.

He looked troubled and unsmiling. The face he makes when he thinks there’s something wrong with my work that he will need to take me to task over it.

“Marietta.”

“Yes...?”

It used to be so exhilarating and joyful to hear Prince Helios call my name, but I never imagined the day would come when hearing it would spark such sorrow in me.

I approached Prince Helios’s seat quickly, bowed, and finally made eye contact with him. Prince Helios gathered some papers on the desk and pointed out my mistakes.

“Marietta, this calculation is wrong. Also, for the ceremony to be held three months from now, it’s Duke Digurell coming from the land of Corliss. See, you’ve misspelled his name. A simple mistake, but it’s disrespectful to an honored guest. I’d appreciate it if you’d be especially careful with things like that.”

“I understand...”

“You don’t have to rush. Both mistakes could have been prevented if you paid more attention and taken extra care with the details. For now, please create documents with more emphasis on accuracy than speed.”

“I’m terribly sorry...!”

Why?

I never thought I would make so many mistakes. After all, my grades at the Academy weren't particularly bad, and I'd never been told that I had a bad memory or a careless way about myself.

I'm not a particularly talented person, but I thought my intuition was pretty good... Even if I couldn't suddenly be like my sister, I at least wanted to do the same kind of jobs as Lady Linde and Lady Ladia. But the more impatient I was, the more mistakes I made.

Both my sister, who was always giving me guidance, and Prince Helios, to whom I submitted the documents I drafted, were kind to me, but I felt that Prince Helios's tone was gradually changing.

No doubt, he was growing tired of me.

Thinking about it made me desperately sad and made the back of my nose sting. At this rate, he might get furious. My heart would break to have Prince Helios think me useless. I had to get a grip. If nothing else, I wanted Prince Helios to think that I was a reliable worker.

And so, I desperately applied myself to my work. But then my sister, who came to the salon late, said in front of everyone something that sounded like, "Maybe there's no need to wait until the next generation."

I couldn't believe my sister, who never, ever made careless remarks in public, would say such a thing.

I was surprised... And sad and frustrated.

No matter how much I may have wished for it, I could never become Prince Helios's wife.

My sister had enjoyed the right to stand beside Prince Helios since the day she was born. Prince Helios held her in such high regard. Yet she spoke about the coveted position of being Prince Helios's betrothed as if she held no interest in it!

When I questioned her about it in the carriage on my way home, I stiffened when I received an unexpected response.

“I overheard Prince Helios and Lord Mashlo say that you would be more suitable as a princess than I am, Marietta.”

Everything went blurry. *I... What did I say on that occasion again?*

Did I get carried away in front of Prince Helios and say something foolish?

I couldn't remember clearly. But the look on my sister's face was hurt and sad. I had never seen such pain in her expression before.

I never could have imagined my sister was listening to such a stupid conversation. And I couldn't believe she'd been upset about it all this time.

“I'm sure you would be far more suitable as Prince Helios's wife, Marietta. You haven't seemed very cheerful lately, but I know you can get past it. You just have to try your very best.”

Despite all of it, she gently put her hand on top of mine and smiled softly.

How could she say that? After how badly I had wounded her?

How could she say that? I'm no match for Lady Linde and the others, let alone my sister.

How could she say that I could get past it?

Unlike my sister, I was useless. I had no idea things would be this difficult.

I could never smile so calmly after so much hardship, after so much sadness...

“I'm so sorry, Seren.”

I didn't even know what I was apologizing for anymore. All I knew was that I couldn't stop saying sorry.

Sudden Momentum!

“OH, so all that happened at the salon?”

“Yes, I thought maybe this conversation in the salon would be of some help when Prince Helios comes to decide on his future bride, so I said, ‘Maybe there’s no need to wait for the next generation.’”

“You stepped in again,” I said.

“Yes, Marietta scolded me for it. She said it might lead to misunderstandings.”

“Hmm, well, that’s— Whoops.”

“I’ll hold it for you.”

With Lady Seren’s support, I tried my best to lick the cheese that was about to spill out. Today’s dessert was a little challenging for a cat to eat. However, as I’d come to expect from the pâtissier, the taste and the ingenuity of its creation were top-notch.

This dessert was called cheese tart fondue. It must have been freshly baked and had a fragrant flambéed surface and an attractive aroma. At first, I’d thought it an ordinary cheese tart, but hot, melted cheese filled the inside. The name was quite apt, and its melty texture was satisfying. What a genius that pâtissier was, to be sure.

“But well, it’s rather ironic for you to get complaints from your sister about that,” I remarked.

“Hehe, when she scolded me about giving up on the position of princess consort so frivolously, I confessed that I’d overheard the conversation at the salon.”

“Did you really say that?!” I was shocked.

“Yes. I just made my exam entry, so I supposed I was feeling a little over-excited.”

“So? What was her reaction?”

“She paled and apologized... But if it wasn’t for that incident, I wouldn’t have noticed Marietta’s or Prince Helios’s feelings. Nor would I have ever thought of becoming a High Mage. So I’m actually grateful for it now.”

After I finished the cheese tart fondue, I looked up at Lady Seren. Her eyes were as calm as her words implied. Wiping her hands with a napkin, she slowly stroked my fur as if to check it was groomed right, then she narrowed her eyes and smiled happily.

“It’s thanks to that day that I can spend time with you as Vi and Lord Viol like this. I feel nothing but gratitude,” she said brightly.

“I see... I believe it must have been painful for you at the time, but I, too, am grateful that we met, Lady Seren.”

But even as I spoke, I felt embarrassed somehow and hung my head.

However, if Lady Seren was having such exchanges in the salon and with her sister, even when it became clear she would eventually become a High Mage, there would be people who could quickly understand that those exchanges had been a stepping stone toward that goal...

“I see. Then all that’s left is to talk to your father,” I said.

“Oh, but I’ve already told him.”

“Come again?”

“Earlier, I consulted with my father. It’s rare for me to ask for an audience with him, so he gave me his time as a top priority.”

“Whaaat?!”

“We were talking right until just before you came, Vi. In fact, we had a very long talk.”

You work fast, Lady Seren! Oh, how can you be so calm?! Does that mean your father has given you his blessing?!

Questions ran through my head at a dizzying pace.

Lady Seren smiled softly, putting a warm hand on my back and slowly stroking me, even as I jumped in surprise.

“I was going to tell you everything, Vi. Will you listen?”

“Of course!”

“Then, let’s talk. It might be a long story, but...”

“Okay. Please tell me what you’re at liberty to share. And in detail, please.”

“All right. When I entered Father’s room, he and Mother were waiting for me.”

I settled down, listening intently.



“**SO**, Seren. What’s all this about? It must be serious, for you to request a formal audience with me.”

“Yes, Father. Actually, and I know this is a bit sudden, but... I’ve decided to become a High Mage.”

As Lady Seren began her story, I jumped up spontaneously.

“Wait! Wait, wait, wait! So you just dove right into it?!”

“Yes. They were both flabbergasted. But I knew what I was asking was major, so I thought it would be better if I cut right to the chase,” she said.

“Well, a preemptive strike can be useful. It doesn’t give your opponent any space to think.”

“Hehe. Well, as predicted, they wanted to know all about what led to this sudden declaration. After that, the conversation went smoothly.”

Lady Seren’s random outbursts of boldness like this one had me puffing out the tip of my tail.

“Of course, I also explained the circumstances. That several gentlemen at the salon suggested Marietta would be more suitable as the princess consort. And that, although I knew Prince Helios felt the same, he was unable to say it

because of my high standing and the lengthy princess consort training I have already done.”

Apparently, her father had said: “I have some thoughts, Seren, but for now, I’ll listen to all you have to say,” and then he listened carefully from beginning to end.

“And so, I spoke as honestly as possible.”

According to Lady Seren, the summary of her conversation with her parents went roughly along these lines:

“I was shocked when I overheard what I did at the salon. ...After much thought, I’ve come to the conclusion that I should step down. So...”

“So you’ve decided to become a High Mage? Seren, you don’t need to be so afraid of your own father to go to those lengths. You don’t need to do something so reckless and dangerous. I will tell the royal family, if necessary, that we are canceling the engagement. If you’re certain that canceling the engagement is what you want, of course.”

“I’m sorry, Father. It’s daunting enough to think of being honest with Prince Helios about this; I’d feel terrible having you stick your neck out to intervene.”

“It is certainly no easy task, but it’s not impossible. Still, we can discuss what steps to take later. Seren, this is a major decision. I want to understand the situation fully before I draw any conclusions. Please explain in detail all that has led to this, and don’t skip anything. And please tell me what led you to abandon your plans of marriage?”

“Oh, Father. Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Hmm? Why do you apologize?”

“I really did want to become a High Mage for the sake of Prince Helios, Marietta, and the future of this country. But...”

“But? Uh-oh, I’m getting a bad feeling about this.”

“But the more I learn, the more fun magic becomes... And for the first time in my life, I have something that I cannot give up.”

She placed the Recording Orb in front of him with a gentle clack, and he

gasped in recognition. Her father was, indeed, a discerning person.

“I’m sorry, Father. I really want to become a High Mage. ...But not for anyone else. For myself.”

Then, Lady Seren activated the Recording Orb with her magic, and it projected a realistic display of battle prowess in the air right in front of the duke and his wife.

What must they have thought to see their daughter riding on a cart, skirt and robe tucked up, flying around in the sky?

It was the record of her battle with the Garussulus, depicting Lady Seren engaged in an aerial battle against a gigantic bird with flashy plumage. After getting in some damage by firing Wind Cutters in rapid succession, she flung it up in a whirlwind and slammed it to the ground. Then she finished with a triumphant Wind Bomb. A heroic display, which was no doubt enjoyable to behold.

“What...? Whaaat?!”

“Seren...”

With a startled expression, her mother looked back and forth, comparing the footage on the Recording Orb with Lady Seren as she stood at that moment while her father clutched the hair at his temples.

No doubt it was a mind-boggling thing to see.

“Today, I submitted a battle record even better than this and entered the exam to become a High Mage. I really do apologize for acting in my own selfish interests. But I can no longer pursue the path of being Prince Helios’s bride.”

“You’re really serious about all this, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Even if I don’t pass this year, I want to try again next year.”

“Hmm...”

“I will protect the country and its citizens using my own abilities as a protective shield instead of acting as the matriarch of the realm. I will develop new forms of magic and new magical technologies... I will live out my life as a High Mage.”

Apparently, following this declaration, her father ordered her to “manipulate the wind” while covering his mouth in awe.

After witnessing Lady Seren float softly in the air along with the chair she was sitting on, then circle the room once and land in her original position with an innocent expression on her face, her father smiled and said only this:

“Who did you learn this from?”

“Archmage Viol taught me recovery and wind magic at first. The rest, I suppose, was self-taught.”

“Self-taught... But how and when...?”

“The Archmage of the Third Mage Guild...? That genius?”

“Yes. ...We crossed paths when I was in tears after what happened at the salon... He took pity on me and taught me magic as a mentor.”

“Really.”

Her father, who lowered his eyes and pondered for a moment, appeared to have a wry smile when he next looked up.

“Then it was almost all self-motivated study. You set this goal in your heart and pursued it thoroughly. Seren, in an odd way, you are much like me.”

“Yes, indeed. Just like when you started trading, dearest. Why, I hadn’t a clue what had gotten into you.”

“Well, if you’ve found something more immersive than the consort education you put so much effort into, I have no objection. As far as I can see from that visual record, even an amateur like myself could tell that your talent for magic is extraordinary, Seren. I have no choice but to give you my full support.”

“Are... Are you sure, Father?!”

“Yes. Ah, but knowing this now, I should really have put you through the Magic Academy system.”

“Oh, you weren’t to know. Our daughter applied herself so diligently to the princess consort training almost to the point of illness. Magical training on top of that would have been too much. She might have died!”

Lady Seren breathed a sigh of relief, shocked by how readily her father had accepted her plans. Her father, too, looked somewhat pleased to her.

“Seren, if you become a High Mage, please develop all sorts of interesting magic tools.”

A statement typical of Lady Seren’s father, who was well-known for being a novelty-loving eccentric.

“Oh, dearest, really. What are you saying now? What if our daughter gets a reputation for being a mad tinkerer? She’ll never get married then.”

“Let those who want to talk do so. Those who engage in idle gossip have nothing of value to add.” Lightly chastising his wife, the duke turned to Lady Seren, who straightened in her seat. “We will support you, but I still want to think more about how to deal with the royal family and sort this all out. But first, you have more explaining to do. Please, tell me exactly what has led you to abandon your marriage plans.”

“Well... Once someone said that Marietta might make a better queen, I realized... That it was true.”

“Why?”

“Marietta is gorgeous, sociable, and naturally beautiful, with the ability to attract people. If she acquires the right knowledge through princess consort training, she will surely become a more wonderful queen than I ever could.”

“Hmm, but what of the prince?”

“Prince Helios would crush his own desires and stay with me for the rest of his life, all for the sake of his country. And I could not stand it if that were the case. I can no longer stand by his side and smile the way I used to. Now, every time I see Prince Helios smile, I feel desperately sad. Yes... That’s truly how I feel...”

“Oh, Seren...”

As she listened to Seren talk about her feelings regarding what had happened, her mother, sitting opposite, seemed overcome and moved to the seat next to her daughter. Holding her hands in her own, her mother gently smiled.

No doubt the mother had soft, warm hands like Lady Seren when she

caressed me. No doubt her mother's touch was just as soothing.

"It's been more than two months since what I overheard at the salon, but I haven't changed my mind. I'll carry the country and the citizens on my shoulders for the rest of my life. But I want to work with the spouse that Prince Helios chooses to do that. I think that would be the best way."

"I never imagined you felt that way... I'm so sorry, Seren. I've failed as a mother." Apparently, Lady Seren's troubles had her mother feeling downcast. "Unlike your father, who was always off trading, I have always been by your side, but I didn't even realize how you were feeling. ...But two months ago... That was right when your princess consort education ended, wasn't it?"

"It was."

"Since then, you seemed to sleep well at night, your complexion brightened, and you smiled more. I thought, 'Oh, Seren seems much happier and livelier these days.'"

"Oh, Mother..."

"And recently, you've finally started going on dates with Prince Helios. You've both worked so hard since you were little, so I was relieved you'd finally found the freedom to do so. I was so delighted."

"That's because I didn't want anyone to worry, so I acted as normal as possible. Besides, even though I started this venture based on certain events, I found magic unexpectedly interesting, and recently, I've been enjoying it for its own sake."

"Really? Are you sure you're not forcing yourself?"

"If I was forcing myself, I wouldn't make a request like this."

"Hmm, but Prince Helios has been trying to deepen his relationship with you recently. He certainly seems more proactive."

"I believe the king may have urged him. I heard that when he was young, he often went to the castle town with the queen incognito. Prince Helios, too, said he thought we should do that as well."

"I see, so that was his logic."

“Yes. I feel terribly guilty that he doubtlessly wanted to go with Marietta instead. If possible, Father, after I’m no longer Prince Helios’s fiancée, would you be able to put in a good word for Marietta so they could be together?”

“Could it be that Marietta’s participation in the salon, and your request that she have a private tutor, was because of this?”

“The salon was purely Prince Helios’s idea. But the private tutor, well, I thought it would help her with her princess consort training.”

“Hmm... Realistically speaking, I can’t just recommend Marietta immediately after breaking off your engagement, Seren. It will be necessary to confirm the intentions of Prince Helios and Marietta and consider them separately.”

“Yes, please do.”

Her father knew he had to tread lightly here. Probably, I needed to do the same.

“Seren, I now understand your feelings on this matter. I, too, will consider how to best approach the royal family. Now, I believe a practical High Mage exam is coming up? Focus all of your efforts on that, and study hard.”

“Oh, Father! Thank you!”

“...And, well, Seren. You seem to have your mind made up about the path you intend to take, so I wasn’t sure whether or not to say this to you, but... I believe I must speak.”

“Yes?”

“I thought you would make a wonderful queen. Your wisdom, your diligence, your calm personality, the perfect education for a princess. You have a stable reputation inside and outside the castle as a wonderful candidate for a royal wife. ...And above all, Seren, you devoted yourself whole-heartedly to princess consort training, did you not? Ever since you were a child, you’ve always been single-minded and stubborn, in a sense. I have always thought that your ability to overcome any difficulties was your greatest strength.”

“Oh, Father...!”

“Just as you feel that Marietta has good qualities that you lack, I believe there

will come a day when, no matter who becomes the wife of Prince Helios, we will all be haunted by the lost possibility of Seren, a most wonderful candidate for the future queen. But everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. No one is perfect, and there's no need to compare yourself to others."

"Yes... Indeed, that may be true."

"You will break off your engagement with the prince. A new princess will be decided. Many one-sided opinions, rumors, and speculations will circulate around the palace, but there's no need to take them seriously or churn over them. Everyone sees things differently based on how they want to see them. No doubt they'll trumpet over it and make a lot of fuss."

"..."

"But don't compare yourself to others. Don't be deceived by what people say. Go forth on your own path with all of your strength. If you are determined to be a High Mage, become a great one whose name will go down in the history books."

"Oh, Father... Thank you."

With that, the father, the mother, and Lady Seren ended their discussion.

"Don't compare yourself to others, don't be deceived by what people say... It's easy to say but hard to do in practice."

"Yes, indeed."

Lady Seren smiled wryly as she stroked me languidly and softly. Her father was a known eccentric, so his words suited him well. He had the kind of reputation his words backed up.

Despite his status as a duke, where he was in a position where he could easily monitor his subordinates and wait for reports, he went out on the ships himself to many different countries, bringing back new technologies and products with glee to introduce to his own country.

On the next occasion, if he encountered some new magical product, he'd no doubt bring it home. ...Certainly, for a high-ranking aristocrat, he was strange.

However, Lady Seren was strange as well. Suddenly deciding to become a

High Mage, right after finishing her princess consort education. Her father must have given her his advice based on his own experience.

“It was painful for me to hear after being so shaken up by what everyone said at the salon.”

“Perhaps your father didn’t want you hurt further with careless words? The world is full of people who never look closely at themselves and instead put others down.”

We all have the right to free speech. A serious effort might be enough to manipulate certain rumors, but as her father said, there’s good and bad behind what people say. I’ve had my share of things said about me. And, of course, some of it has stuck with me most unpleasantly.

And it was true Lady Seren’s delicate heart would break if she took such nonsense seriously.

“Well, that sort of thing was the catalyst that led you to find a path you want to devote yourself to for the rest of your life. Many live without finding that. You’re fortunate to have found your vocation. It must have been destiny.”

I lifted my head to see Lady Seren looking down at me with serenity in her eyes.

“Yes. I am very happy now.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear your father understood you.”

“Yes. No matter how long it takes, I swear to become a High Mage...!”

Lady Seren’s quiet fighting spirit was so cute. I had the feeling she’d become a High Mage with relative ease, with no need for such steely determination. Yes. Almost certainly.



THE afternoon of the day following our talk.

Faced with an unexpected guest, I was dripping sweat with nervousness.

What is going on?

“Long time no see, Duke Qumildy,” I greeted.

“It has been a long time. You’re a difficult man to arrange a meeting with, so I’ve brought something special for you today.”

Lady Seren’s father smiled.

As expected, he appeared to have brought me a new trade item. He was on good terms with our deputy division commander, Disto, but today he asked to see me specifically, saying he had something he wanted to show me directly.

No doubt he had come to discuss Lady Seren. But I had no idea why he’d come all the way to see me. I couldn’t predict his intentions, so I braced myself. Unlike Borden, I’m not good at reading an opponent.

“Hahaha, as expressionless as ever.”

The duke laughed openly, looking so youthful that I doubted for a moment if he was old enough to have fathered Lady Seren.

He had light brown, soft-looking short hair like Lady Seren. It was brushed back with a hand comb, and there was not even the slightest hint of formality in his manner.

He had dark skin from regular sea voyages, with smile lines around his eyes, and a muscular body, one which you wouldn’t think of as belonging to a high-ranking aristocrat. He gave off the aura of a man of the sea.

“I wonder if we might speak in private?” he asked.

“Certainly.”

I shot a signal with my eyes, and both attendants left the room, leaving only me and Lady Seren’s father. I was so nervous I could barely breathe.

“Since you wanted to speak in private, I suppose that means the magical tools are a pretext, and you have something secret to discuss. But the soundproofing is secure, so don’t worry,” I assured him.

“You’re nothing like the capricious division commander, I see. That’s a relief.”

“So, what is it you’d like to discuss?” I asked.

“You cut to the chase. But negotiations go much better after a little chatting. Ah, but then, you’re famous for your dislike of small talk. Let’s get down to

business right away, then.”

“Please do.”

Otherwise, my heart was likely to give up the ghost.

“My daughter has made her entry for the High Mage exam, hasn’t she? She confided in me herself only last night.”

Who’s the one cutting to the chase now? I froze inside, surprised by the preemptive attack. As I might have expected of Lady Seren’s father, his first strike was decisive.

“Boy, was I surprised. When she showed me that impressive battle record, it was enough to make the balls shrink. Then she said she had submitted one even better to the exam board! Who knew my own daughter was such a fiend?” Using his widely spread legs as a support, he leaned forward, looking at me with a grin. “So, what’s the deal with my daughter? What’s your estimation of her as part of the next generation of Mages?”

“...Your attitude is not very dukely,” I remarked.

“Many of my negotiating partners are nobles, but many are also stubborn craftsmen and rough sailors, and I find it’s easier to be blunt. There’s no need for you to stand on ceremony either, Lord Viol. I want to hear the frank opinion of an expert on the matter. Please, give it to me straight.”

Neither his attitude nor tone matched the elegant report I’d heard from Lady Seren. I wondered if he was trying to create a casual atmosphere where someone like myself, who came from a commoner background, might find it easier to talk.

“You must not share what I am about to tell you with anyone, Lady Seren included,” I started.

“You have my word.”

“This morning, the Council reviewed the submitted records. And it has been unanimously decided that she has qualified for the main exam.”

“So she’s got what it takes for that, at least.”

“Her combat record stood out in many ways compared to the records of past

successful applicants. She's been highly recognized."

"I see. I thought as much myself, but I'm also an amateur when it comes to magic. I wanted to hear your opinion."

Then the father chuckled as if delighted his daughter had the right stuff. It was the face of an ordinary father who knew his daughter had overcome a great difficulty with success.

"By the way, according to my daughter, her success is the result of self-study, except for having you teach her the basics, Lord Viol. And it seems that she reached entry level in just two months. ...But is that really possible? That girl isn't one to lie, but I can't take it with a grain of salt. Becoming a High Mage is probably one of the hardest things a person could do, is it not?"

"I'm frankly surprised, too. It's true she learned fatigue recovery magic about two months ago, but she was an amateur at that point." I answered as carefully as I could.

Her father wasn't just an odd fellow. He was a seasoned negotiator. If I didn't hold my own here, he could have me on the ropes.

"I have never heard of anyone reaching an exam-entry-ready level in just two months, even with the most skilled of tutors," I said. "Actually, I'd like to know in more detail what study methods she used to reach this proficiency."

"I see, so you think so too, eh, Lord Viol?"

"...I believe she must have been very motivated."

"Hmph. You stumbled upon my daughter crying, did you not, Lord Viol? Perhaps you... Seized the opportunity?"

"Seized...? What are you implying? What power do I have to manipulate a young woman?"

"Let's see, for example, perhaps you perceived Seren's talent, and you suggested, or perhaps guided her toward becoming a High Mage?"

Lady Seren's father grinned at me, his tone loaded with meaning.

He came all the way here to satisfy his curiosity about that?

Still, it was no surprise that he'd suspect something like that. I had given Lady Seren plenty of guidance, and this possibility had been on my mind since I heard that her father had come to see me. This was all well within the expected range of questioning. No need to panic.

"I may have spotted her talent... But when I first taught her magic, her abilities were average. I thought her concentration was amazing, but nothing stood out enough for me to predict these results."

"Hmm, not at first, you say? Well, let's leave that as it is for now."

"It's true. In the first place, it's impossible to predict that anyone could become a full-fledged Mage in such a short time."

"Well, I suppose not. Oh, and have you fallen in love with my daughter? You know, that kind of thought has sprung to mind. I heard you asked Seren to dance at more than a few evening parties."

I thought my heart was going to stop.

But it was all right. I wasn't coughing, and my expression probably didn't waver much. I lowered my gaze slowly without breaking a sweat, so my eyes shouldn't be swimming. My heart rate was dangerously high, yes, but surely not audible.

Probably, he wouldn't be able to sniff me out.

"Hahaha," he laughed gaily, but I couldn't let my guard down because his eyes watched me astutely. ...This man, at first glance, looked like an open-minded person, but I got the impression he could be terrifying if angered.

"Well, that's not really the issue at the moment, so let's not go there now. As long as Seren is happy and on her own path, trivial things don't matter." With a hearty laugh, the duke finally looked away from me.

I was so relieved.

Honestly, I was worried about the risk of accidentally saying too much, but in truth, Lady Seren's potential was so high that I wanted to talk about it with excitement.

At today's council meeting, the talk was all about Lady Seren. I couldn't

pretend to act like I wasn't interested. And, more than anything, I desperately wanted to get across Lady Seren's depth of effort and her amazingness to her father, so I squeezed out a few words.

"The thing is... When it comes to magic, Lady Seren probably was almost completely self-taught. There has been talk of that in the Council as well."

"Hmm, what do you mean?"

"I think you've seen it for yourself, but her fighting style is unique. No one has ever fought in the sky before. I've never flown myself, either, and even the other users of wind magic said they had never thought of that kind of fighting style."

"It was impressive, wasn't it? She even flew in front of me!"

"Usually, it would be impossible to avoid attacks while flying and deploying multiple spells, including protective walls and offensive spells, at the same time. Flying itself is a complicated magical procedure, requiring much magical control ...It must be a technique she devised on her own. At least, that is the conclusion I've come to."

"Hahaha. You don't have to go on and on. But I'm happy to have my daughter praised in such a way."

The duke laughed at me.

Oh well. This was the price I had to pay to convey the impressiveness of Lady Seren without spilling too much.

Her father, looking more and more pleased, looked me right in the eye and spoke again. "I just want to clarify... From the perspective of yourself, a rare magical genius, is our Seren at the level that would make your Third Mage Guild classify her as a highly desirable candidate?"

"Absolutely!!!"

I accidentally put way too much enthusiasm into my answer.

Of course, I wanted her for the Third Mage Guild. I was desperate to snatch her up and secure her right away. No one had the aptitude to be a High Mage like her. In addition... Yes. On a personal level, I would love to work with her.

Ahem, I cleared my throat and tried to work out what I wanted to say to her father.

“In just two months, she’s learned a lot of magic, mastered it, and even created her own new magic and tactics,” I said. “Despite being a gently raised duke’s daughter, she has the courage to stand up to magical beasts alone. She has the concentration necessary to maintain multiple types of magic. Such a talent. I want her to demonstrate those abilities...as a High Mage.”

“Haha, that’s the first time I’ve heard you praise someone so passionately.”

“It’s proof of how rare a talent she is. Lady Seren needs to become a High Mage. She will surely become a great Mage who will further the development of this country by leaps and bounds.”

“Really... Indeed...” The duke nodded as if he was mulling it over. Then he smiled softly. “I’m glad.”

Ah, perhaps I was finally glimpsing the man’s genuine emotion. I certainly had that impression.

“Ever since she was a child, Seren’s never asked for a thing for herself. She did what she was supposed to. What was expected of her. Then for the first time, she speaks. She does not want to be a princess consort, she says. She wants to be a High Mage instead...” Laughing, a little embarrassed, he scratched his nose. “I may be a foolish parent, but I want to grant that child’s wish.”

“...Lady Seren will be very pleased.” I spoke without thinking, then had to follow it up quickly. “Well, there is no cause for concern. With her talent, she can pass the High Mage final exam. With her ability to delicately adjust her magical output over an extended length of time, there’s no way she’ll fail.”

“Ah, exams, they’re all about ability. Of course, I never planned to intervene there. There are other areas, though, where my input may be useful.”

Ah, yes, he’s Lady Seren’s father through and through, I thought with relief. He had not come here to ask for anything devious. I appreciated his spirit of fair play.

“As you know, Seren was set to become the next queen. And she was supremely qualified for the job, and I’m not just saying that because I’m her

father. There's a good chance some people won't like the idea of her leaving that position and becoming a High Mage instead."

"Even so, isn't it impossible to stop her? I thought not even the royal family could intervene when it came to rare assets like the High Mages."

"Only on a surface level. They're tricky, though, those naysayers, since they come at you all subtle-like. In fact, Lord Viol, you may be in for quite the headache yourself."

"I will?"

"That's right. Since this came when she just finished princess consort training to perfection, some out there may ask, why can she not perform half of her duties as a High Mage and half as a member of the royal family? Some may say there is no need for a dissolution of the engagement at all."

"But that's... That's unthinkable, isn't it? No... No, there may be a possibility of that..."

"Right? They can't stop Seren from becoming a High Mage. But what if they pressured her to do both? Being such a serious and hard-working person, she might go for it and work herself to the bone trying to avoid inconveniencing anyone."

"That... That simply will not do!"

I could see Lady Seren agreeing to it as well. Without even a word of complaint. I had to prevent that at all costs.

"Lord Viol, you don't want a potential asset split between your own interests and those of another party, do you? For the sake of your future magical subordinate, can you lend me a hand here?"

"...What would you have me do?"

The duke grinned, the corners of his mouth rising. He had me over a barrel, but what could I do? If there was any way I could assist, I was prepared to give it my all.

"Aren't you close with that young prime minister?"

"Borden? Yes, he's a close friend, I suppose."

“I want you to covertly get that young prime minister on our side.”

“Are you serious...?”

“Dead serious.”

I finally understood his true intentions and why he had come here to see me.

Of course, he'd come to find out Seren's chances of passing the exam, to find out how her abilities were being assessed, and to make sure he had me as an ally. However, after that, the secondary purpose was to secure Borden, the prime minister, as a pawn to keep the royal family and surrounding nobles in check. What a sly fox.

“He's in charge of all practical matters of state. A well-placed word from a key player like him could instantly quell turmoil in the palace. Conversely, without him on our side, he might be a dangerous opponent. If angered, he could find any loophole in the law to his advantage and spin any situation in his favor.”

As the duke spoke, his expression grim, I thought he might be right.

Borden had a high opinion of Lady Seren's abilities and wanted her to join the official palace business as soon as possible. Certainly, Borden could prove a troublesome person to have as an enemy.

“Luckily, the young prime minister is said to think about overall optimization rather than his own interests. Having Seren as a High Mage might be advantageous to the whole country. In that case, he may well come to our side as an ally. That's my thinking, anyway.”

“Yes, yes, you could be right...”

“And to argue that, I need someone with an expert magical opinion, don't I? Moreover, you are also a close friend of his. There's no one else I can entrust this crisis to except you, Lord Viol.”

“...But is it wise to divulge to Borden the truth about Lady Seren's plans to become a High Mage at this point in time?” I asked, concerned.

“Of course. We must strike first. Show the man the Recording Orb she used for her entry. He'll be so flabbergasted he won't be able to make a squeak of protest.”

After that, Lady Seren's father left with a hearty, "Counting on you, Lord Viol!" and a triumphant grin.

Feeling relieved to be alone, I let out a big sigh.

Oh, that was nerve-wracking. I may have risked permanent cardiac damage.

Secure Borden, eh? What a thing for Lady Seren's father to come out and ask.

With another small sigh, I started thinking about how best to broach the subject with Borden.

Borden 3

How Can I Be Calm?!

“WHAT’S up? Coming to see me all of a sudden with such a dour look on your face.”

I was surprised to see Viol sitting on a chair in the drawing room. His expression held a level of solemnness one doesn’t often see. As soon as I settled on the sofa, Viol took out a pendant from his pocket and placed it on the table.

“Don’t say anything. Could you just look at this first?” he asked.

“That’s...a Recording Orb, isn’t it?”

Once lightly activated with magic, the Recording Orb immediately began to project a terrifying scene.

A magical beast, its roar enough to make your hair stand on end, was frightening to behold, even in projected form. It was a particularly dangerous bear-type magical beast among the mid-rankers, with a gigantic body and superhuman strength.

“A battle record?” I said. “Ah, it’s not from a person’s point of view, but a fixed point type, rather rare these days.”

“Right, well, the fighting style is the point to focus on, perhaps.”

Then I realized what Viol was indicating.

“Fighting while flying...?!”

The fighter, an adventurer it seemed, flew around the gigantic bear with great agility and suddenly soared into the sky beyond the reach of even its colossal form. The gigantic bear, rearing up on its hind legs, roared in frustration and clawed at the sky with its strong paws. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the adventurer felled the surrounding trees all at once, then used them as spears,

flinging them at the giant creature.

Was it for this reason they had taken to the sky?

Standing up, reaching its massive paws to the sky, the giant bear was defenseless, and now countless wooden spears were stuck in its chest and stomach, areas it had failed to protect. The quality, quantity, and speed of the Wind Bomb spells, landing in rapid succession, were top-class.

I watched with amazement as the mid-ranked giant bear was helplessly pummeled. Even with wooden spears piercing its body, even after receiving a barrage of Wind Bombs, the giant bear still hadn't died.

It was blinded but raised its paws again and let out another roar that made the forest tremble.

The adventurer, looking down, skirts fluttering in the sky, took a deep breath, and that's when it hit me.

"A woman fighter! And an incredibly skilled one at that!" I exclaimed in awe.

As soon as she opened her eyes, a whirlwind kicked up at the feet of the giant bear. In the blink of an eye, it grew into a gigantic whirlwind that lifted the huge body high into the sky.

Then, the wind suddenly stopped. The giant bear's body dropped and slammed into the ground with a colossal thump. This time the giant bear was dead.

"...Incredible."

It had all happened in the space of a few minutes.

Never had I seen such a succinct and impressive battle. Though the fight was over, I watched in stunned amazement as the woman breathed a sigh of relief and descended from the sky.

Is she... Is she riding on some sort of cart?

"Look closely at her face."

I did as Viol said and focused on the woman's face. Her face came closer as if she was about to reach out and touch the pendant that seemed to be fixed

somewhere, and the projection stopped abruptly.

“Lady... Seren?” I hesitated.

“Yes, it is Lady Seren. It appears she came in person yesterday to make her entry.”

“Huh? What? Hold on. Are you kidding?”

“It’s true, be calm.”

“How can I be calm?!!!”

Yelling out, I told myself that no, it couldn’t be. It had to be some sort of optical illusion.

I closed my eyes and reorganized the situation in my head.

I had heard from Riesz that Lady Seren was practicing wind magic. But barely enough to raise a whirlwind. He had said that her output was still unstable, hadn’t he? It didn’t make any sense. There was no way she could create a battle record like this one, showing such a skilled wind magic user.

Perhaps it was a woman who happened to resemble Lady Seren. I’ve heard of such things. Others in the world who look just like us.

“This individual... She does indeed look just like Lady Seren. And her skills are formidable.”

Haha, I laughed dryly, but Viol was quick to shut me down, saying. “It’s her.”

It was unlikely to think Viol, of all people, could be pulling a fast one on me. But I couldn’t believe it, so I tried to convince myself in different ways that it couldn’t be Lady Seren. However, even though Viol himself didn’t seem to know the details, he was adamant that it was really her. Finally, I had no choice but to accept what he was saying.

“Duke Qumildy just came to visit me and actually consulted with me about Lady Seren,” Viol said.

“He consulted? With you? About what?” I was all questions.

“Borden, you must have noticed Lady Seren’s aptitude as a High Mage is far beyond the common level.”

“I see... A High Mage...”

I was so surprised that I almost forgot.

That’s right, that wonderful battle record exists as entry material for the High Mage exam.

I, too, received an education in magic. Of course, Lady Seren’s talent was striking... Or rather, it was obvious her level was beyond what the average person could reach. Yes, I understood all that very well, only...

“Wait. A High Mage? Then that means Lady Seren and Prince Helios’s engagement is...?”

“It will be canceled,” Viol said flatly.

“No, no, no! Don’t just try to brush that aside! Her, no longer the future queen? Unthinkable!”

“Yes. His Grace was also worried about people saying just that. ...That’s why I’m here today. Borden, we must ask you to lend us your wisdom. I apologize for the position this places you in.”

I was puzzled by Viol’s demeanor. He sounded hesitant, like a student who had come to his teacher for advice. On rare occasions, I had heard him out and advised him, yes, but when we were students, it was always Viol helping me out. Sometimes to the extent of serving as a private tutor. I still hadn’t forgotten that kindness.

And so, I could never say no to a request from Viol. I sensed what Duke Qumildy would ask of me, but I had no choice but to listen carefully to what Viol had to say.



SHORTLY after Viol left, a servant announced that Duke Qumildy was here to see me.

Good grief, I suspected he’d come, but to come before I’d even gathered my thoughts... I sighed and instructed that he be shown in from the reception room. Then I stood up and waited for him to enter.

“Hi there, young Prime Minister! It’s certainly been a while.”

As usual, he greeted me casually. Hard to believe he was a duke. The line between my brows deepened.

Sitting face to face with Duke Qumildy, I pushed up my monocle lightly and responded in a flat tone. "I thought you'd be along to see me sooner or later."

"From your expression, I'm guessing you heard all kinds of things from that friend of yours, eh?"

"Yes, as you can imagine. Please, stop using him. Unlike you, he's honest and easily manipulated."

"Hahaha, it would be difficult for the young prime minister to judge this matter without an honest opinion from an expert, right? And I thought it would be more persuasive that way, rather than having me suddenly appear and show you, well, *that*."

God help me, this fellow understood the psychology of the individual, despite his wild and unchained nature. The duke was sincere, but stubborn and strong-willed. Those qualities had aided him in forging incredible business relationships. It was precisely because of the kind of person he was that he had interesting negotiations with a variety of countries.

"Well, I can't deny he'd see right through a trick Recording Orb or some dodgy fake magic," I said. "When it comes to magic, I have utmost faith in his assessments."

"Right?" The duke grinned.

"Just as Viol said, Lady Seren's aptitude as a High Mage is outstanding. But she has never missed a step in her princess consort training. Despite all that effort, she is suddenly aiming to become a High Mage. I can't understand her motivations," I said.

"Ah, yes. Well, it seems Seren decided to become a High Mage two months ago."

"Two months ago?!" I yelped, surprising myself.

Was he trying to say she had reached the High Mage exam-ready level in just two months? Please, such jokes.

I, too, had studied for the exam, so I knew it wasn't something you could enter for on a whim. Oh, there were too many things I wanted to ask. Without realizing it, I found myself clutching my temples.

"Ah, perhaps I should hear this in chronological order... What exactly happened two months ago to Lady Seren?" I asked.

"I haven't discussed this with Lord Viol. But I believe it's something you ought to know, Prime Minister. Please, don't tell anyone what you're about to hear." With a sudden serious expression, the duke began speaking in a hushed tone.

"Of course, I won't tell anyone," I vowed. "This room is also soundproofed."

"Oh, yes, I understand that."

As I listened to Duke Qumildy, who spoke with a conflicted expression, I felt my own face growing blank. Lady Marietta, more suitable as a princess than Lady Seren? On what grounds?

"Idiocy," I said. "Marietta knows not the first thing about being a queen. The two are incomparable."

It must have been those four problem kids saying such brainless things.

Useless boys, obsessed with Lady Marietta, neglecting their work every time she went to the salon. I should have intervened in person, not simply asked Riesz to straighten out the matter.

"Well, it hardly matters what was said," Duke Qumildy said. "Seren took it all very seriously. And it seems that it wasn't just about her own suitability for the role, but more for the sake of Prince Helios's happiness. She said she would shoulder the well-being of the country her whole life and cooperate fully with whomsoever Helios chooses as his queen."

But still. Helios didn't even deny the words of those four reprobates...? And for him to say he might be disinherited... My word, who could blame the girl for no longer wanting to go along with such a sham engagement?

However, I couldn't believe Prince Helios was dissatisfied with this engagement. Why, just the other day, he happily reported to me he had gone out on the town with Lady Seren again.

“Well, I suppose I understand, on a fundamental level ...However, I don’t believe Prince Helios is dissatisfied with the engagement or is in love with Lady Marietta,” I said.

“But Seren, at least, is convinced he has no love for her,” Duke Qumildy sighed. “I’d thought the two were finally bonding, going on dates, but apparently, he said it was all on the king’s suggestion.”

I clutched my temples again.

Certainly, it was only recently that Prince Helios realized he should deepen his friendship with Lady Seren. He must have been scolded by the queen, pressured by me, and given advice on girls by the king. And with Lady Seren so diligent, it was no doubt hard for him to protest.

“Well, whatever the trigger, the landscape has changed now,” Duke Qumildy said. “Seren has decided to throw everything away to become a High Mage. There is no way for the cat to be put back into the bag. It would be better for the realm if Seren focused her energy on becoming a High Mage from now on.”

“Yes... Everyone was looking forward to seeing Lady Seren start her duties as the future queen, so I’m sure there will be much disappointment.”

“We must all accept the new situation. Not only Seren and I, but also the prince. Each of us needs to stop and take stock of our failures. For that reason, I need your help, young Prime Minister.”

“Take stock? Of your failures? Lady Seren and yourself?”

“Yes. Seren didn’t have to take it so seriously when she heard that gossip at the salon. If she had at least consulted me at that point, we might have solved it without facing such a dangerous situation. That’s what Seren should reflect on.”

“That’s... Well, that may be so, but...”

“And the fact that we weren’t the kind of parents Seren could confide in. That is something that my wife and I should reflect on.” Duke Qumildy laughed sadly, saying, “What a hopeless pair of parents, eh?”

“Of course, those boys were idiots to gossip like that in the salon when anyone could overhear them through the door. And Prince Helios, too. They

would do well to learn what damage idle talk can cause. I believe their parents need a lesson in proper guidance as well, wouldn't you agree?" Duke Qumildy said.

"I suppose that's true. I'd rather not believe my brother could have been foolish enough to join that sort of talk, but... Well, it sounds like we need to find out exactly who was there, don't we?"

"Ah yes, your younger brother was also a salon member, wasn't he, young Prime Minister?" The duke glared at me for a moment, his eyes sharp. His tone was even, but no doubt he was genuinely angry.

He quickly looked away, his expression calm again, but honestly, I'd found him a little frightening just then.

"But as for His Highness... It's complicated. We won't know what's going on there without asking him," Duke Qumildy said. "Whether it's Marietta or not, if there's someone he really wants to be with, I do empathize. I'm reflecting now on whether I should have asked both Seren and Prince Helios if they were dissatisfied with the engagement."

"Seriously...?"

"It's been seventeen years since the engagement was decided, and these days, no other families set up arranged marriages for their children, do they?"

"Well, that's true, but..."

"Because Prince Helios and Seren were so diligent about working hard as the future king and queen, we assumed they would not be dissatisfied with their engagement. ...And really, when you think about it, two such responsible young people wouldn't be the type to voice complaints, would they?" Duke Qumildy pointed out.

"Just as you say."

"But as a parent, I should have properly talked to the royal family in accordance with the current times." Duke Qumildy spoke with a self-deprecating smile as if he himself could scarcely believe he hadn't even noticed such a thing, let alone thought to discuss it. "I don't know the true intentions of Prince Helios at this point in time. However, as you say, Prime Minister, if the

prince had no objections, then he would have stood up for Seren during that cruel conversation they were having about her. He did not protect my daughter.”

It was true; there had been a lack of care on all sides. Until now, the two were desperately trying to further their royal education, so they hadn’t developed their relationship, and that probably contributed to the misunderstanding.

“But because of the recent events, my Seren found a vocation she can dedicate her life to. It will be a good change for her, and I think it will bring good results for the country in the long term.”

“There is no doubt about that.”

“Even so, if she becomes a High Mage and suddenly breaks off the engagement, rumors will fly among the nobility, and they won’t be subtle either. Before the results are announced, we must speak with the king and queen—and, if possible, with the people who are likely to make noise. What I want is for you to back me up, young Prime Minister.”

“Are you planning to lay the groundwork for the royal family before the results come out?! Viol asked me to help suppress those who wouldn’t be happy about Lady Seren stepping down as future queen and help create an environment where she can concentrate on her work as a High Mage, but...”

“Oh, of course, I want to ask you to do that, too. But you’re the Prime Minister. That’s not nearly enough.”

“Please...”

“I will explain to the royal family how Seren aspires to become a High Mage, but there’s no way I can allow something so scandalous to circulate freely among the others. It is true that Seren will step down as queen of her own accord, and Seren and I are prepared for some slander. But if possible, I’d like to talk with the royal family and see if we can’t put a positive spin on all this.”

“A positive spin... What do you mean exactly?” I sensed an incoming headache.

“Well, that’s the issue. I’d like to minimize any backlash against the royals and, if possible, Seren. To make it seem that the dissolution of the engagement

can only be a good thing, but I can't quite come up with any genius ideas. So, I thought that you, young Prime Minister, with your wisdom and knowledge of the situation in the royal palace, might brainstorm with me."

"Don't you think you've already asked me to do enough?!"

"Oh, but you're our reliable Prime Minister. See how much trust and faith we place in you?" He reached out with a powerful hand and clapped me on the shoulder. His friendly smile seemed rather terrible now.

"You've brought me an awful lot of trouble," I sighed. "I feel like I'm about to start balding from the stress."

"Ah yes, male pattern baldness. Such an awful thing."

Don't say that with such a sympathetic look.

"I'll look for a good hair restorer for you. If you go around the world, as I do, you come across all sorts of cures and potions."

"Well. Thank you."

Then I watched as the duke exited the room, a grin on his face, saying, "I'll come again."

I wanted to put him on some sort of ban list to prevent him from ever coming again.

The Time Has Come To Tell All

“I’M so tired today...”

As soon as he came into my room, Vi muttered those words while stretching his limbs on the table. His ears, tail, and whiskers were drooping, so he must have been exhausted.

“Shall we have some tea first?” I presented today’s snack right under Vi’s nose.

Today we had fruit pudding tarts to try. They were a beautiful dessert, flush with large pieces of fresh fruit that rested on a soft bed of pudding. The tarts, which were smaller than my palm, came in five varieties of fruit: peach, orange, grape, kiwi, and strawberry. They all looked gorgeous.

“Which fruit do you like best, Vi?”

“My favorite is peach. So sweet, so juicy, so fragrant.”

“Here you go. Hmm, perhaps I’ll try the strawberry.”

“Each fruit has its own unique taste and texture... The variety. Ah, so delicious... So soothing,” he cooed.

The sugar hit seemed to flow through him to the tip of his tail. It twitched and curled most adorably. I gently stroked Vi’s small head. He seemed to be in an excellent mood.

“But you know, your father is a tricky one,” he said. “I get the impression he’s magnitudes stronger than Borden at negotiating. No wonder he’s such a great tradesman.”

“Hmm, I suppose so. I’ve only ever interacted with him as his daughter, so I wouldn’t really know.”

“Even so, Lady Seren, your father cares for you very much. He’s doing everything he can to make it as easy as possible for you to focus on your High Mage career. Make sure those efforts are not in vain.”

Vi’s words filled my heart with surprising warmth.

Once I realized I wanted to become a High Mage for my own sake more than for anything else, I prepared for the possibility of failure and was ready to support myself as an adventurer for a year until the next exam came around.

Whatever the inciting incident, I’d ultimately decided to end the engagement with Prince Helios for my own reasons. I prepared to forge a lonely path ahead by myself from now on, but...

But my father understood what I was up against and was paving the way for me as much as possible. I felt greatly indebted to him... And extremely thankful.

“Of course, I will do my best until the day of the exam.”

“Yes, that’s the spirit. Then, shall we begin?”

Standing up smartly on the table, the cat looked at me with jet-black eyes.

The practical exam was nigh, and Vi and I worked hard on my ability to subtly manipulate my magical output.



THE next day, after finishing classes, I hurried toward the salon.

A friend had asked me to explain something they hadn’t quite grasped in class, and after helping them, I’d ended up running a little late. I was also worried about Marietta. She’d seemed despondent at breakfast this morning.

Father must have called Marietta to his room last night and talked to her. When I’d asked him to help Prince Helios and Marietta become a couple, he’d said he would hear what Marietta had to say. I was sure that had been the focus of their conversation.

If Marietta honestly expressed her feelings for Prince Helios, surely Father would help her. I didn’t understand why she looked so depressed.

When I was climbing the stairs to the corridor the salon was on, I spotted

Marietta running out of the salon. Covering her face with a handkerchief, she tried to run past me without even noticing me.

I called out without thinking.

“Marietta...?!”

Marietta stopped and looked at me, then turned and ran again.

“Don’t follow!” she shouted. “I’ll... I’ll be back shortly!”

She was crying. *What happened, Marietta?*

She told me not to follow, but I couldn’t help it. My feet moved on their own.

At that moment, I heard the sound of the door opening behind me.

“Marietta!”

It was Prince Helios’s voice.

I heard his footsteps running behind me. What happened between Marietta and Prince Helios that would cause him to chase after her in such a fluster?

Confused, I rounded the corner. Marietta bumped into a well-built man coming in the opposite direction.

“Ack!”

Marietta’s slight form was knocked backward, her slender legs kicking upwards.

It was a most unfortunate place to slip.

She had been right at the top of the stairs, and now, she toppled backward down them.

“Marietta!!!”

As she fell and I shouted, Marietta’s eyes met mine.

Large tears spilled from her eyes and floated into the air. Marietta’s slender hand reached out to me for help. I immediately formed a wall of wind around her to support her.

“Marietta! I’ll save you!” I shouted.

“Huh...? What?”

Marietta’s body gently floated up in the air. Hovering in the middle of the open staircase, not falling, she went stiff, her eyes open wide.

“Prince Helios!” I turned and snapped sharply at Prince Helios, who was also frozen, motionless beside me. Seeing him twitch from the corner of my eye, I yelled at him again. “Quickly! Catch Marietta!”

A human being is not a rigid object like a cart; Marietta was extremely difficult to move through the air. All I could do was hold her there.

But, by gradually thinning the wall of wind I had built under Marietta’s body, she naturally descended toward the floor. Then, Marietta slowly fell into the arms of Prince Helios, who was now waiting with his arms outstretched in the middle of the stairs.

The moment Prince Helios’s arms firmly embraced Marietta’s body, I heard a commotion all around us and ended my Wind Wall spell.

I took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from my forehead. I hadn’t been this nervous since the beast subjugation.

“...That’s amazing! How did you get so good?”

I turned to the person who’d spoken beside me. Lord Riesz stood there with wide eyes. And Lord Mashlo and the others were there, too. They must have been the ones gasping and clapping just now.

“Marietta!!!”

“Are you okay?!”

“Thank goodness you’re unharmed!!!”

Everyone started speaking at the same time, their gazes locked on the stairs. Confused, I looked to see Prince Helios climbing up them, still holding Marietta in his arms.

Marietta’s face had gone pale, doubtlessly because she was so scared. Marietta’s slender fingers clung to Prince Helios’s shirt front and seemed to be trembling.

Oh, I'm so glad she wasn't hurt.

A salon member ran up to the two, slipping past me as I stood there numb with relief. All the men were worried about Marietta and talking over one another, and there was much confusion. More and more people had started to gather.

As Prince Helios slowly ascended the stairs with Marietta in his arms, a crowd gathered.

The well-built man who'd bumped into Marietta desperately apologized, but Marietta had caused the collision, running blind with her tears. It wasn't his fault. Of course, Marietta also apologized to him.

The man seemed relieved she was uninjured and left the scene after a few more apologies. He must've thought it a wise idea to leave since there was a growing crowd of spectators now. Prince Helios allowed him to depart, so I had no objections to him leaving.

Marietta, who had been lowered to the floor by Prince Helios, was still pale, and her legs trembled as she leaned against him.

I approached Marietta and spoke to her. "Marietta... I'm so glad you're all right."

"Oh, Sister...!"

As soon as our eyes met, Marietta's eyes welled up with tears.

Marietta raised her arms and tried to step closer to me, but she stumbled. Luckily, Prince Helios had a firm, supportive grip on her.

Poor thing, she must have been so scared. I knew what it was like to be unable to walk straight due to terror. I didn't want her to strain herself, so I moved closer to her when...

"Marietta?!"

An unexpected voice rang out.

"F-Father..."

"What's happened? What is all this commotion?"

Father came running from the opposite end of the corridor in a panic. Someone passing by must have reported the situation.

“Marietta collided with a gentleman on the stairs and tumbled down,” I explained.

“Is she hurt?!”

Pushing aside the men surrounding Marietta, Father inspected Marietta’s face and arms. Once he’d confirmed that there was no injury, he breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“It’s okay. Prince Helios caught her. It must have been scary, but she doesn’t have a single scratch, I’d wager,” I said.

“What...?! Prince Helios... Thank you,” Father said.

“No, no, all I did was catch her...” Prince Helios stopped himself, turning to me. “Seren. Just before, Marietta seemed to float in the air. Did... Did you do that?”

“Oh, well...”

Right. Unwittingly, I’d revealed the fact that I could use magic.

In Marietta’s crisis, I had unintentionally deployed magic, but... I didn’t know how to explain this. My eyes watered involuntarily.

I saw my father frowning from the corner of my eye and felt immensely guilty.

But there was no way out of this situation. I would have to explain this somehow, being as vague as I could possibly be.

“Actually, I found out I have an aptitude for wind magic, so I’ve been secretly training in wind magic for some time. I’m certainly glad I did; without it, I may not have been able to help Marietta.” Hiding my inner turmoil, I’d explained as casually as possible.

“Sister... Thank you!”

As a tearful Marietta and I hugged, I snuck a look at Father. He shot me a meaningful glance as if telling me not to say too much.

Between us, unspoken, we decided to say as little as possible until we could

return to our family residence and discuss things properly.

“Well, I’m just glad to see that nobody got hurt. Prince Helios, Seren, thank you for protecting Marietta.”

After thanking us, Father took Marietta and left. He’d said he was going to take her to see a doctor, just in case. And I understood the longer we all stood there, the more rumors would spread.

Prince Helios and I followed suit and quickly headed to the salon. On the way, he whispered to me. “Seren, I’d like to thank you, too. I scolded Marietta so harshly that she almost got herself badly hurt. I’m so glad she was all right. Thank you very much.”

What had happened between Prince Helios and Marietta?



“PRINCE Helios, I would like to talk to you. Do you have a moment...?”

The next day, when I called out to him in the corridor leading to the salon, Prince Helios stared at me and then nodded firmly.

Then, probably realizing it would be hard to talk freely in the salon, he invited me to his office in the royal palace.

I wondered how long it had been since I’d been in this tastefully decorated office, its décor mirroring Prince Helios himself. Last time, the others from the salon had been present too, but now it was just us.

I can’t help but feel nervous, but I really need to talk with him privately today.

“It’s rare for you to approach me with a topic of discussion, Seren. Could it be that what you want to discuss is what happened yesterday... With Marietta?” Prince Helios looked embarrassed, but that wasn’t what I wanted to discuss.

“I talked with Marietta about what happened yesterday,” I said. “The thing you lectured her on was something she really should have known, and she was rather depressed because she felt guilty for disappointing you.”

“I regret that my words might have been too harsh.”

“Not at all... Based on what I heard, nothing was wrong with what you said or

the way in which you said it.”

“Well, I hope that’s the case.”

“Marietta wants to become a fighting force as soon as possible, but it’s not going well, and she’s flustered,” I explained. “She’s younger than us and has less experience, so it’s only natural, but she can’t see that herself.”

I remember that feeling, too. And I thought that Prince Helios must as well. As expected, he gave me a wry smile, saying, “I understand a little of how that feels.”

“That’s not what I want to talk to you about today, though. ...Yesterday, I cast magic, didn’t I? It’s about that.”

“Oh, that certainly was a surprise! There’s already a lot of talk about you going around the academy and the royal palace. Even though you didn’t ever attend the Magic Academy, you still saved your little sister with some amazing magic. I have to say I feel rather proud of you myself.”

I’d been getting some of that, as well. Various people from the Academy had approached me to talk about it. At the time, I’d thought that only a small percentage of people realized I’d used magic to save Marietta, but the rumor had spread fast.

“A lot of people have asked me about your magic as well, Seren. It was hard to ask you in front of that crowd yesterday, but how did you learn such amazing magic? And what else can you do?”

As the prince praised me and laughed about how he wanted me to show him the magic I had learned next time, I tried to hide my nerves. My fingertips went ice cold, and my clenched fists trembled slightly.

Finally, the time had come to unveil a colossal secret.

I couldn’t afford to be intimidated here. After all, I was the one who’d asked Father for so much yesterday.

Last night, Father called me to his room and said, “Tomorrow evening, I have secured an urgent meeting with the king and queen. I intend to discuss your High Mage plans with them.”

“...Oh! Tomorrow?”

“Indeed. It’s better to strike quickly. I set up a meeting to begin right after the salon, so please come to my chamber first. You and I shall attend together.”

It was all so sudden, and I was awash with nerves. I thought I still had a little more time to prepare.

How to face those who had doted on me so far? How to announce that I’d suddenly chosen a different path? I stiffened just thinking of the huge challenge rapidly approaching me.

“Originally, I wanted to inform them after laying the groundwork more firmly. ...But now the prince, the salon members, and various nobles know you can use magic. It would be better to report the truth swiftly to the king and queen rather than risk having rumors precede us.”

“Yes, you’re right...”

Father had no choice but to change his plan because of me, using magic on the spur of the moment. I had no right to complain. However, thinking of how I was about to confront the king and queen, I couldn’t help but imagine Prince Helios’s face.

The topic of discussion was intrinsically linked to Prince Helios. It didn’t seem right to spring it on him at the same time as everyone else. And things would go smoother if we knew Prince Helios’s true feelings for Marietta.

Before reporting to the king and queen, I wanted to tell Prince Helios in advance. When I asked Father for permission, he thought it over but said, “Very well. You must tell him in the way you see fit, Seren.”

I was grateful for Father’s trust in me, so I asked the prince for a private word.

“Actually, my magic has improved surprisingly in the last two months.”

As I began, Prince Helios blinked at me.

“So, when you asked for freedom during the time usually spent on princess consort training... It was to practice magic?”

Prince Helios certainly was sharp. But where to begin explaining things? ... After hesitating for a moment, I took a deep breath.

“Yes. Two months ago, I started to study magic with a clear goal. But I was short on time, so I had to make that kind of selfish request.”

“But I heard that your princess consort education is almost over. So there’s no real issue, is there? Now, I have no idea what possible goal you could have, but I worry about you overworking yourself.”

“Hehe, but I sleep a decent eight hours every night.”

After laughing, I quietly held my breath. I still had the audience with the king and queen today. Even if work at the salon was delayed, I couldn’t afford to stay behind. I didn’t have much time to work with.

“Actually I... For the past two months, I have been training hard at magic to become a High Mage.”

“A... A High Mage?”

“Yes, I am proud to say that I have acquired the level of ability necessary to enter the exam.”

“To exam entry level? You must be joking, surely?”

“No, really. I entered the other day.”

As soon as I said that, Prince Helios stiffened.

“...Wait... Hold on... Why? What does this... What does this mean?”

I smiled at Prince Helios, who gazed at me with a stunned look as if he finally understood why I was saying this. I wanted to discuss that fateful day that started it all, but I had to do so as gently as possible.

“Actually, two months ago, in front of the salon door, I overheard something. A voice advising you that... That Marietta would be a much better future queen than I would.”

“...?”

Prince Helios frowned and looked confused. My heart sank.

Maybe it was simply a casual conversation in his mind. Something so insignificant that he couldn’t even recall it. If so, that would be disheartening for me.

If it was so insignificant to Prince Helios that he couldn't even remember it, then it made me feel like a fool to have been so hurt and to have worked so hard to change the future.

Or, if it was the sort of thing he discussed with his friends so often that he couldn't remember which specific occasion it had been... That would be very sad as well.

I didn't have the courage to pursue that line of thinking. Instead, I quickly summarized the conversation in question.

"Judging from the voice, it was Lord Mashlo who said: 'Look, what I'm saying is that you'd better make your intentions clear, Prince Helios. Just announce that it'd be better for you to marry Marietta.' And you, Prince Helios, you responded: 'If I so much as even suggest otherwise, I could end up being totally disinherited.'"

Prince Helios gasped. No doubt the occasion in question had finally come to him.

"Unfortunately, that was the first time I realized you didn't want to be engaged to me. And it made me feel terrible and guilty inside."

"No! You're wrong! That's not true!"

The blood drained from Prince Helios's face, and I tried to show him a reassuring smile. After all, it must have sounded like I was casting blame on him. *Oh, it's really hard to express how you feel.*

"That was just idle conversation; it was not my real intention! If I offended you, I apologize!"

"Offended... But I am the one who was oblivious to your true feelings, Prince Helios. It is I who should apologize. There is no need to be bound by the old way of thinking about engagements these days," I told him.

"But that's...!"

"As I said at the salon the other day, you are the one who will shoulder the weight of this country, Prince Helios. You should have the right to decide with whom to share this burden."

I heard him sharply inhale through his teeth.

“And if you find it too hard to speak up, I shall do so for you. That was my original motivation behind pursuing the path of a High Mage. If I pass the exam, our engagement will naturally become void, don’t you see?”

“Wait, please... Earlier, did I hear you say that you’d already entered?”

“Yes.”

“But what if you pass?! Our engagement will be ruined...! If you thought that way, why... Why didn’t you talk about this with me before entering?”

“I thought it was meaningless. I knew you wouldn’t say anything that would hurt your relationship with your future fiancée, would you?”

“But I...” Prince Helios trailed off. I was right on the money.

“Besides, now I genuinely have a burning desire to become a High Mage. Honestly, I believe it might be my divine calling in life.”

“What? Becoming a High Mage, not the queen, is your divine calling? But this is lunacy!”

As Prince Helios stood there frozen in disbelief, I placed a Recording Orb in front of him with a soft clack.

“Here. A battle record of mine. One that I didn’t use for the exam entrance.”

Prince Helios 4

That's Not True!

SEREN had learned magic in order to become a High Mage. Not only that, but she'd entered for the exam already. I could only stare at her as she said these things with a straight face. She didn't appear to be joking, but it was all so impossible that I couldn't process it.

"...Wait... Hold on... Why? What does this... What does this mean?"

Why did Seren need to enter that exam? I didn't understand.

As I stood there, confused, Seren continued.

"Actually, two months ago, in front of the salon door, I overheard something. A voice advising you that... That Marietta would be a much better future queen than I would."

"...?"

Two months ago...?

I went back through my memory. Talk of that kind... It must have been Mashlo and the others. If anyone else had suggested that to me, I'd have laughed and said, "*No way.*" But Mashlo believed it, and I'd started to go along with that narrative.

The more I argued, the more he would yell and bicker, so these days I tried to let it go. ...Never would I have imagined that Seren was listening.

With a bitter feeling, I bit my lip.

"Judging from the voice, it was Lord Mashlo who said: 'Look, what I'm saying is that you'd better make your intentions clear, Prince Helios. Just announce that it'd be better for you to marry Marietta.' And you, Prince Helios, you responded: 'If I so much as even suggest otherwise, I could end up being totally

disinherited.’”

I gasped.

“Unfortunately, that was the first time I realized you didn’t want to be engaged to me. And it made me feel terrible and guilty inside.”

“No! You’re wrong! That’s not true!”

Blood drained from my face. I was dumbfounded. Dealing seriously with Mashlo and the others’ unrealistic claims gave me a headache, but still... What a stupid response I gave!

Certainly, it was only recently, when we started going out together, that I began developing deeper feelings for Seren. Until then, I think I had a stronger sense of her as a reliable partner who would someday help me support the country.

That aside, no part of me ever balked at the concept of being engaged to Seren.

My remarks, which I meant lightly, were only said to avoid provoking Mashlo and the others. But they hurt Seren in a completely unexpected way.

I scrambled to apologize to Seren, who looked genuinely sorry.

“That was just idle conversation; it was not my real intention! If I offended you, I apologize!”

“Offended... But I am the one who was oblivious to your true feelings, Prince Helios. It is I who should apologize. There is no need to be bound by the old way of thinking about engagements these days,”

“But that’s...!”

No.

You’ve got it all wrong!

Words of denial spun in my head. Seren didn’t need to feel sorry for anything. How could I persuade her this was all one big misunderstanding? ...I was at a loss.

“As I said at the salon the other day, you are the one who will shoulder the

weight of this country, Prince Helios. You should have the right to decide with whom to share this burden.”

I held my breath. Certainly, Seren had said something like that.

At the time...I wondered why Seren would say such a thing. What’s more, when I said, “In the next generation, we may indeed do away with the idea of predetermined fiancées,” Seren had replied, “In that case, maybe there’s no need to wait for the next generation.”

Depending on how you took that, it sounded like she was implying breaking off our engagement would be the way to start. That maybe it wouldn’t be such a strange thing at all. Even I had felt there was more to her words.

However, it would be dangerous to carelessly dig into the meaning of her words in front of everyone else, so I let it slide.

Did Seren say that because she thought I didn’t want to be engaged to her?

In front of everyone in the salon, Seren implied she was willing to break off her engagement with me. That it might be better to do so. In other words, she would be ready to accept it immediately if I wanted to cancel the engagement. I felt dizzy.

“And if you find it too hard to speak up, I shall do so for you. That was my original motivation behind pursuing the path of a High Mage. If I pass the exam, our engagement will naturally become void, don’t you see?”

I was appalled.

She wasn’t just willing to accept the possibility. Rather, Seren was actively thinking of ways to break off the engagement. If she became a High Mage, it would automatically cancel our engagement. There was no better way to do so unconditionally and unequivocally.

Of course, being a High Mage was one of the most difficult challenges there was. Wanting to be one was one thing, but there was no way she’d be able to qualify for the exam.

Then I suddenly stiffened.

“Wait, please... Earlier, did I hear you say that you’d already entered?”

“Yes.”

She had to be kidding!

There’s no way Seren, who hadn’t even been to the Magic Academy, could enter! But that aside...if it were true that she had indeed entered... How could she stand there looking so calm?!

“But what if you pass?! Our engagement will be ruined...! If you thought that way, why... Why didn’t you talk about this with me before entering?”

I realized my tone had grown accusatory, and I shut my mouth, embarrassed. Her calm gaze on me, Seren responded in a steady voice.

“I thought it was meaningless. I knew you wouldn’t say anything that would hurt your relationship with your future fiancée, would you?”

“But I...”

My mouth twisted. It was just as Seren said.

Even if I were dissatisfied with my engagement with Seren, I probably wouldn’t tell anyone about it. If there were a serious problem with her behavior, I’d speak up for the sake of the country. But outside of that, I would feel I had no choice but to keep my mouth shut.

Certainly, whether or not I was dissatisfied with our engagement, I might have responded the same way. With that in mind, I could understand Seren’s actions. But still... I would have liked to be informed!

“Besides...” Seren’s smile was like a flower coming into bloom. Radiant and beautiful, in contrast to my confused, swirling thoughts. “Besides, now I genuinely have a burning desire to become a High Mage. Honestly, I believe it might be my divine calling in life.”

“What? Becoming a High Mage, not the queen, is your divine calling? But this is lunacy!”

The words spilling from Seren’s lips were unbelievable.

What was she talking about? She’d worked so hard on her education all to become the future queen, hadn’t she? All the instructors who taught her said there was no one who worked with all their heart and soul and mastered

everything perfectly as Seren did.

So why become a High Mage? There seemed no possible explanation for it.

Clack.

Seren placed a transparent glass bauble in front of me as I stood there looking unconvinced.

“Here. A battle record of mine. One that I didn’t use for the exam entrance.”

“A battle record?”

Could this be a Recording Orb?

From the way she spoke, I could guess this would prove her aptitude as a High Mage. A suspicious crease formed between my eyebrows.

“I’ll play it.”

She activated the ball with her magic, and a scene of a deep forest with many trees appeared. There, a gigantic bird with flashy rainbow-colored feathers glided down from the sky with terrifying force. Countless blades of wind rushed toward the bird.

The black robe fluttered, and a flash of bright green caught my eye.

A woman dressed in bright green adventurer’s clothes... It was unmistakably Seren.

“It’s a battle record of me fighting a bird-shaped mid-ranked monster called a Garussulus.”

Was I dreaming?

“It’s not quite as good as the one I used for the High Mage exam entry, but I think I put up a good fight.”

“A good fight...”

The woman in the record... Seren...chased a giant bird soaring into the sky.

“No way... Is that really you, Seren? Flying...”

Breathing flames, the beast swooped down with terrifying force and attacked with its sharp beak and claws. Seren swooped through the sky more lightly than

the birds, plundering countless opportunities for hits. Launching blades of pure wind, she attacked mercilessly.

Then colorful feathers fluttered down from the sky. Though it was obviously a bloody battle, it was also beautiful.

Finally, she hoisted the bird into the sky with a whirlpool of wind, then slammed it into the ground, finishing it off with an explosion-level shock wave. She'd killed a huge, terrifying bird magical beast with the greatest ease.

After witnessing the end of the magical beast, the adventurer who gracefully descended from the sky headed straight for us. The large projected face was unmistakably that of Seren.

"It's really you... It's you, Seren..."

Even I, a man who enjoys swords and horseback riding, have only ever hunted low-ranking magical beasts. In the Recording Orb, my fiancée, who was supposed to be a graceful lady who couldn't even kill an insect, had just unilaterally trampled an enemy many times larger than herself.

"I think I've achieved good results by studying magic hard for the past two months!"

Seren looked happy... So blissfully happy.

In just two months?

With her level of skill?

Saving Marietta, about to fall down the stairs, would have been a cakewalk for her.

"Right now, learning magic and thinking about new magic is so much fun. It's true that at first, I wanted to be a High Mage so you could have your true heart's wish, Prince Helios. ...But now, I don't think there's any other occupation that I could be so absorbed in."

As I stood there, speechless with shock, Seren talked about her passion for magic with a big smile. *Thinking of new magic? With just two months to cram for the exam, how did she find the time for that?*

"This is my own selfish wish, now. Even if I fail the exam this time, I want to

train more and take the same exam next year. Today, actually, Father and I have an appointment to see the king and queen and ask for their permission.”

Seren looked me right in the eye as she spoke.

Ah.

Now I realized.

Seren had already made up her mind.

Whether she passed the exam this time or not, she no longer desired to become my princess consort. I closed my eyes, realizing that she’d made her intentions clear.

I slowly opened my eyes and looked at Seren.

“...If that’s the case, I’m sure I’ll be summoned there too. Can you give me a moment to process all of this?”

“Certainly.”

Seren nodded. I was sure Seren had come to me in advance because she knew I’d need time to digest this. If I had heard it on the spot, I would have been so surprised that I wouldn’t have been able to say anything.

“Seren, you said the conversation you overheard at the salon two months ago was what made you want to break off your engagement with me, right?”

“Yes.”

“...Is that really the only reason?”

Gazing at Seren, I finally asked her the question that had been nagging me this whole time. Because for me, that was the true mystery.

Seren was so dedicated to her princess consort training.

Since she was just a child, she used all her time for learning, even when everyone was playing, napping, chatting, relaxing, and having fun.

Seeing Seren act that way made me want to do the same.

Was it possible for such a girl to abandon all her efforts so easily just because of one overheard conversation?

“Seren, is it not true that... That the impetus for all of this was that you got fed up with our engagement?”

I didn't want to ask that. But I felt like I had to. I had to know.

But Seren's eyes grew wide as she denied it.

“No, that's not true. That day, I... I cried so much.”

“You did?”

“Until then, I never doubted that when the time came, I would become your wife and protect this country with you. But then, after what I heard... I felt so pitiful to think my efforts until now had only caused you to suffer. So I couldn't stop crying.”

What was she talking about? I hadn't even noticed that the day in question had caused her to cry.

“My tear-swollen face must have been terrible to behold. When I ran into Lord Viol that day by chance, I was a mess. And so, he taught me recovery magic.”

“Archmage Viol...?”

“Yes. But meeting Lord Viol like that was what got me into magic. And what inspired me to become a High Mage.”

Seren smiled softly, but I didn't even know where to begin apologizing to her.

“I see... Then, the conversation between me and Mashlo and others was the trigger. I'm really sorry. I hurt you severely with my careless words.”

“No, I think it needed to happen. If it hadn't been for that, I never would have noticed anything was amiss. That everyone in the salon thought I was unfit to be the future queen and your bride. And that you were trying to forge an unwanted marriage with me.”

“Listen...! I keep telling you that you're wrong about that!” In a panic, I interrupted Seren. “I was never dissatisfied with my engagement to you. I was determined to carry the country on my shoulders with you by my side, Seren. You work harder than anyone. And you made me want to work hard, too. And recently, we finally started getting to know one another more.”

“I’m sorry about that, too. You really wanted to go out with Marietta, but had to worry about my feelings, didn’t you?”

I clutched my head. *Please, don’t make this sound like a regret, too.*

“I don’t have any special feelings for Marietta,” I insisted.

“You... You don’t?”

For some reason, Seren seemed surprised. A little sad, a little conflicted.

“Why do you have that look on your face? I don’t remember giving Marietta any special treatment.”

“But, you danced with Marietta at every ball, and even though you were in different grades, she seemed to have more chances to talk to you than other young ladies at the academy, right? I was certain Marietta was your favorite.”

“Because Mashlo and the others keep bringing her around at the academy...!”

But even as I denied it, I realized my actions had been basically inviting misinterpretation. I was so focused on what I had to do that I paid too little attention to how others saw me and what I wasn’t supposed to do.

I let out a deep sigh.

It’s so difficult to guess what’s inside someone’s heart. Without realizing I was attracted to Seren, she believed I was in love with Marietta.

In the same way, I never even realized my careless remarks hurt Seren or that, because of them, she’d decided to abandon her plans of becoming my wife to become a High Mage instead.

We can only gauge the feelings of others by external words and actions.

The damage an ill-spoken word could do shook me.

How many times had I done or said things that caused misunderstandings like this?

“It’s a pity. As Lord Mashlo and the others say, Marietta would be a good queen who could inspire others,” Seren said. “In fact, Lord Mashlo and the others are really working hard these days. If only Marietta received a princess consort education, I believe she could be a real asset to you, Prince Helios.”

“Don’t take what Mashlo and the others say so seriously...! When it comes to Marietta, they’re all half-crazy anyway.”

I spoke with bitterness.

I was warned early on that people like Mashlo and the others, who have only moderate ability but loud voices and too much attitude, will do a lot of harm and bring no benefit. That they should either work harder or be kicked out of the salon. Yes, not only Prime Minister Borden but also Andel and others advised as much, but ultimately, I was the one who didn’t make a move.

We had studied together since we were kids, and since we were in the same grade, we’d spent the longest time together. The issue of Seren and Marietta aside, we’d always been able to talk freely amongst ourselves and have fun.

But I was naïve.

This was the price for allowing them to have free rein.

“Well, ultimately, I’ve jumped the gun and acted ahead of confirming your feelings. But, aiming to become a High Mage will allow me to demonstrate my power in the right place, regardless of gender or social status. And I believe I can help you to build the strong country you’re aiming for in the future,” Seren said.

“But...”

I hesitated.

It was sensational, really, to think that not only Lady Linde and Lady Ladia, the daughters of a duke and an earl, would aim to become civil officials but also that my fiancée, Seren, would abandon that path and aim to become a High Mage instead.

In Seren’s case, judging by what I’d just seen in the Recording Orb, she had what it took. If she worked as a High Mage, the people would have no choice but to change their attitudes toward her.

Certainly, this move might bring us closer to shaping the kind of country I always wanted.

“It’s true that if you became a High Mage, the people might realize that the

times are changing.”

I was to be the leader of the country one day.

A ghost of Seren smiling at me in the downtown region tugged at my heart, but I knew there was so much more we could all gain by her becoming a High Mage instead.

If she was in any way hesitant, I might have persuaded her.

But she had already set her heart on becoming a High Mage. It would be much more constructive to make the most of this new vocation of hers.

“I understand. I’m sorry that my oversight sparked all of this, but at the same time, I support your decision.”

And just like that, I put a lid on the love that had been budding inside me.

Viol 22

Chaos...!

I was stunned by the sight unfolding before my eyes.

What chaos...!

Borden, clutching his temples.

Prince Helios, staring at the sky with a pale face.

The queen, crying and clinging to the king.

Gently patting her shoulder, the king was pointing at the sky while having a pleasant conversation with Lady Seren's father.

And...what he was pointing at was Lady Seren, flying around in the air while sitting astride a luxurious chair.

As I gazed, open-mouthed at her, Lady Seren looked down and noticed me. Muttering, "Lord Viol," Lady Seren landed noiselessly on the ground. Everyone turned to look at me.

"Er... What... What is going on here?" I asked.

Why was I summoned to such a scene? I had no idea what was going on.

Lady Seren was demonstrating her magic in front of the royal family. Did this mean she disclosed her intention to become a High Mage? But she hadn't even taken the main exam yet. Wasn't this jumping the gun a little?

Thoughts swirled around in my head, but I kept my mouth shut. Luckily, I'm expressionless. As long as I didn't speak, I wouldn't give anything away.

"Oh! Archmage Viol. You're here. Good. Take a seat over there." The king, always with a gentle smile, pointed to the chair next to Borden. As soon as I sat on the chair, His Majesty smiled graciously. "Well, it seems that Lady Seren has

decided to become a High Mage.”

Ah, okay. I thought so.

“Apparently, she’s acquired the necessary ability to enter the exam all on her own. I wanted to ask your educated opinion, Archmage Viol. What do you think of her skills?”

“Dearest! If we let a wonderful girl like Seren go, we’ll regret it forevermore!”

“Sheila... Well, you’re right; if you only think about what’s best for the country.”

Ah, it looked like the queen was in opposition. I wasn’t sure what the king thought, but Her Majesty at least clearly opposed Seren becoming a High Mage.

As I stood there trying to grasp the situation, His Majesty placed his hand reassuringly on his wife’s.

“However, High Mages are the cornerstone of our national defense and govern our country’s major industries. The new magic and magical tools they create sometimes transcend national borders and enrich people’s lives. If Seren has a rare talent, it shouldn’t be crushed. You understand that, don’t you, Sheila?”

“But... I...”

After smiling reassuringly at the tearful Queen Sheila, the king turned his smile to me again.

“As you know, Seren is an excellent candidate for the future queen. If she doesn’t have outstanding aptitude as a High Mage, many people would think it better for her to lead the country as its queen. Like my wife, Sheila. But from what I’ve seen, Seren seems to have an extraordinary magical talent.”

Well, he asked what I thought, so I supposed I had better answer honestly.

“Simply put, she is extremely talented,” I said. “Until about two months ago, Lady Seren was an amateur who didn’t even know basic magic. But she’s raised her skills to the point where she’s able to enter the High Mage exam and even devised her own way of airborne battling.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“In just two months, she has shown she has the ability to pioneer new forms of magic. Her talent cannot be underestimated. She will surely become a national treasure. And this is my honest opinion.”

“So even our Archmage Viol thinks so, eh?” His Majesty rubbed his chin.

“Yes. She should become an elite High Mage. It’s not only my opinion but also the consensus of the Council,” I stated.

“I see, I see. So, Borden, what do you think?” His Majesty asked.

Borden finally lowered his hands from his temples and looked up. “Like Her Majesty, I was looking forward to seeing Lady Seren take over palace affairs, so I am at a loss. ...But Lady Seren’s ability as a High Mage will surely benefit the country just as much, if not more.”

“Hmm, I think so too.”

“But dearest!”

“Listen, Sheila. To put it bluntly, High Mages are like chickens that lay golden eggs for this country. It would be foolish to make such a chicken do clerical work. The role of a High Mage is exalted. These are facts that remain unchanging.”

Perhaps he was laying it on a bit thick, but I was relieved he’d summed it up in such an easy-to-understand way. *Right. So High Mages are viewed like that by the royal family, are they?*

“A *chicken*?!” Her Majesty cried, her voice rising an octave. “We’ve thought of her as our own child since she was born! I was so relieved the two of them were finally going out together, but now she says she wants to become a High Mage and do exhausting work?!”

“Being queen is exhausting work, too. If you see her as our own child, shouldn’t you support her wishes? Anyway, Helios has already spoken in support.”

Queen Sheila still looked disappointed, but perhaps pressured by her husband’s unusually strong tone, she tightened her lips, her eyes doleful. *Ah, but wait. Did he say that Helios had spoken in support of Lady Seren?*

“I will allow you to leave the position of Helios’s fiancée and aim to become a High Mage,” His Majesty declared.

“Oh, thank you...!” Lady Seren curtsied deeply.

It was all too sudden, but I was relieved they accepted Lady Seren’s wishes so easily and unexpectedly. She looked happy, too, which was the most important thing.

“However, the problem of how to handle this going forward is of grave importance.” The king, usually so calm, now seemed grave. And it made me nervous. “First, Helios.”

“Yes?” Prince Helios, pale but standing alert, straightened up even more.

“Based on what we’ve just heard, the impetus for Seren’s idea of becoming a High Mage in the first place was a series of remarks made by you, Mashlo, and the other sons of the nobility.”

“Yes. I’m deeply sorry for hurting Seren and changing her future by avoiding an argument. And by making careless throwaway remarks that didn’t even come from my heart.”

Prince Helios spoke, looking especially pale and withdrawn. It seemed he’d come armed with the knowledge of Lady Seren’s change of heart and the event that led to it. He looked most regretful.

And he’d said those remarks hadn’t even come from his heart. Perhaps Prince Helios didn’t have any qualms about marrying Lady Seren, just as I’d always feared.

Hmm. Curious, indeed.

Yes, I was curious, but I couldn’t exactly ask. It would be highly unnatural for me to intervene. Of course, there was no way for anyone to read my inner thoughts, so the talk continued without my input.

“Hmm, yes, you should absolutely reflect on this, including your carelessness in gossiping in a public place where anyone could be listening. You should also reconsider your choice of friends. I planned to let you have free rein during your student days, but I have heard nothing positive,” His Majesty said sternly.

“Yes... I’ve been thinking about that myself for a while. I will reconsider my friendship with them. And when Seren’s decision is announced, I will warn them that they will be removed if there is no improvement in their attitude and performance at the salon.”

“Good. Three years are left until you graduate from the Royal Academy. I hope both you and those boys can take this opportunity to grow,” His Majesty said.

“I understand...”

Seeing Prince Helios grimace, I felt a flicker of empathy for him. At first, I felt sorry for Lady Seren and angry toward Prince Helios, but the prince was still so young. Apparently, he was one year younger than Lady Seren, which meant he was probably only seventeen or so.

Even though his body was growing stronger, he was still a child. Even at the Magic Academy, a lot of kids said dumb stuff when they were around their friends. And I could imagine how annoying it would be to get into a war of words with that red-headed brat, Mashlo.

He didn’t seem the type to listen to much reason, anyway.

I’m aware that I’m not good at communicating with people, so when I see other people struggling with relationships, I can’t help but feel sympathy. Getting along with people is the most difficult thing of all.

“But Helios!” Queen Sheila cried. “Are you sure about this? When you went out with Seren, you seemed to be having so much fun. Can it really end like this?”

“Sheila! Stop it.” The king reprimanded the queen in a commanding voice. “It is impossible for even Seren to serve as both a High Mage and queen. Since I have permitted Seren to become a High Mage, there is no point discussing it any further. Helios also said that he would support Seren’s decision. I have no intention of disregarding their wishes any further. Hold your tongue.”

Queen Sheila gazed sadly at her husband, but his eyes held a sadness of their own. I suppose being king means never being able to fulfill the wishes of everyone you must rule over. But he had chosen the best option he could see

according to the situation, and he did not want to be questioned on it any further.

“Now then, Seren.” Regaining his composure, the king turned his attention to Lady Seren.

“Yes?”

“It’s a good thing you had such a great aptitude for magic. If you didn’t, despite being such a diligent student, you wouldn’t have been able to get results like this.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You said you acted for the good of Helios and your father, but I have a hard time accepting that alone. Not reporting or consulting with anyone is very unlike you, Seren. Nor is it like you to gamble on something so huge when you’re not even sure you’ll be able to do it.”

Borden nodded deeply in response to the king’s words, but I didn’t have that impression of Lady Seren.

She might look cautious and modest, but she’s actually bold and unconventional. Once she sets her mind to something, she’ll pursue it doggedly, even if her chances of success look slim. In fact, her ability to get along with brute force was intimidating.

Ever since she came after me, begging me to introduce her to a tutor, I’d been constantly surprised by Lady Seren. But the king and queen seemed to have been fooled into thinking she was some timid kitten.

“Is there a reason why you thought it couldn’t be resolved through discussion?” he asked.

“That is... Well...because I thought Marietta was the one Prince Helios was secretly in love with.”

The king had been calm in his questioning, but in response, Lady Seren stumbled a little.

“Seren, as I keep saying, that’s just a misunderstanding!”

Seeing how Prince Helios hurried to deny this, even though he usually held his

tongue in these situations, I thought, *Aha. I knew it.*

“Yes, but that’s what I thought...” Seren said sadly. “It would be one thing if you were interested in an entirely different lady, but it would be impossible for you or Father to suddenly announce that you wished to have Marietta installed as queen over me.”

Yes, it certainly would have sounded bad to outsiders. It was easy enough to imagine how those with loose tongues would take such gossip and run with it.

“Even if I did consult with you, and the end result was that our engagement was canceled and Marietta was installed as successor instead, I still felt certain things would not go smoothly,” Lady Seren said.

“Why?” His Majesty asked.

“If only I was laughed at, then it would have been fine, but I thought Prince Helios and Marietta would be looked upon poorly as well... If a scandal preceded Prince Helios’s full-fledged entry into national affairs, it would impact his subsequent reign.”

“Hmm...”

“In addition, even if we did discuss it, I knew Prince Helios would prioritize matters of the country and those around him over his own feelings.”

Even the king, who’d been interjecting with his own takes until a while ago, did not say a word. I’d heard the basics of Lady Seren’s point of view, so nothing struck me as strange, but I wondered how the others were taking these revelations.

When I snuck a peek at Borden’s face, his eyebrows were even more furrowed than before. That crevasse between them might even hold a slim pen.

“But if I become a High Mage, the engagement will be automatically canceled, so there will be no need to announce our union during Prince Helios’s birthday celebration next year. Then, he could build a relationship with the one he truly wants to be with, and the other woman in question won’t be criticized.”

Then Lady Seren looked at her father with a troubled expression.

“And...if I become a High Mage, I will be excluded from the Qumildy family,

and it will be easier for Father to recommend Marietta as Prince Helios's wife candidate. He also won't need to look for a replacement husband for me. I believed my plan was perfect... The way to get out of the engagement without causing trouble to befall anyone else."

Her eyes swimming as she spoke, she added a meek, "I'm so sorry, Father," her face contorted with regret. No doubt she found her father's stern face as frightening as I did. I'd apologize too.

"Um, I learned from our discussion the other day that that wasn't what you wanted, Father. But I still thought it was the best plan at the time. I'm sorry."

"As far as I am concerned, as a parent, I have failed," Duke Qumildy said. "But from now on, rely on me a little more. Even if you become a High Mage, you will always be my child. I am not speaking here as a duke but as your father."

"Father... Thank you."

The king nodded as Lady Seren smiled softly at her father. "So then, from Seren's point of view, the basic thinking here was that Helios and Marietta could wed without hindrance."

"Yes."

"However, Prince Helios is not, in fact, in love with Marietta."

"...Right."

"I understand that you've acted while thinking of the best interests of Helios, your own family, and the country, but do you understand you went about this the wrong way? If you rush forward with a false understanding of the situation without consulting anyone, you may find that the truth is different when you finally get all of the facts," His Majesty said.

"Yes, I... I regret it now."

Seeing Lady Seren shrink, my heart constricted. The king was correct, but knowing how upset Lady Seren was at the time...there would have been no reasoning with her.

But on the other hand, knowing how stubborn and dynamic Lady Seren could be, I could understand the king wanting to gently ground her. A conundrum,

truly.

“Archmage Viol.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

When the king suddenly addressed me, I was taken aback. What could he want to discuss with the likes of me?

“As you can see, Seren is...somewhat inflexible. However, for a High Mage, who embarks on special missions, neglecting the proper process of reporting and following the chain of command can lead to disaster. I want you to guide her.”

“I understand.”

Right. The king was laying this out here all with a view to the future.

Indeed, a High Mage must learn caution. I knew too well how Lady Seren was apt to lose her head and rush in during a crisis situation. But at the same time, that side of her personality gave rise to her innovation and ability to make breakthroughs.

How to guide her and this rare characteristic of hers in the future... That was the big issue here. Scary, but exciting... Indeed, I had mixed feelings.

“However, we have to think carefully about how best to announce all this. When we hit the people with the news that the engagement is off and Lady Seren intends to become a High Mage, well... The rumors among the aristocrats and the people downtown...say nothing of the foreign countries... It gives me a headache just thinking about it.” Here, Borden spoke of the daunting future reality that was awaiting.

He looked grim; he was worried about it. As soon as the king had made his decision, it would be up to Borden to begin thinking of measures to implement it.

“I have an idea about that.” Prince Helios, pale and mostly silent up until now, suddenly spoke.

I was rather impressed, but for some reason, Helios snuck a glance at Lady Seren. I noticed how Lady Seren gave him a slight nod, and it gave rise to an

unsettling feeling within me. A feeling that was both curious and unpleasant and uncommon.

“Seren brought this up earlier, and I’ve thought about it a bit, too. If we announce the news while unveiling the new salon system, I think the public will accept it as a pretty positive move.”

“Hmm. And how do you plan to announce it?”

“It has already been a topic of discussion in the country that one day, we should open up the door to both civilian and military officials so that the people of our country can demonstrate their strengths even more than ever before. And that this should be regardless of gender or social status. Once announced, this matter will not stand out too much.”

“I see, yes; that might be good.”

“From next spring, commoners will be appointed salon members. We will greatly increase the number of women and commoners who can be appointed as civil officials. Not only that, but we will also promote the appointment of women as military officers. ...Internal adjustments are already complete, and we are just waiting to make the official announcement, so there shouldn’t be any problems.”

Neither the king nor Borden seemed to object to Prince Helios’s suggestion.

“And by pioneering that movement, if we announce that the royal family’s arranged marriage system is to be abolished and Lady Seren is embarking on a new career, alongside announcing we have appointed three women to the salon, then I believe it will signify a strong break with old traditions.”

“Indeed, if we mention the ladies involved by their family names, then we can get the aristocrats on board.”

“The public will probably be happy, but it would be better to make an announcement after Lady Seren’s exam results have been made public,” Borden suggested. “It would be troublesome if any doubts were cast as to the fairness of the examination due to Lady Seren being a princess candidate.”

“Actually, wouldn’t there be less suspicion if the final exam were conducted in public view?” Prince Helios asked.

When Borden said this, Prince Helios's expression clouded over with concern. The two looked grim, but Lady Seren's father was grinning at Lady Seren as if there was no finer suggestion.

"Hmm, the doubters will doubt no matter the conditions. But it might be good to demonstrate your strength and silence the nay-sayers, eh, Seren?"

"...Yes! I'm completely prepared to do that!" Lady Seren nodded, clutching her fist in her usual pose. Her brows sharply raised, she looked incredibly brave. My heart warmed, a smile on my lips, but Borden sighed heavily beside me.

"Your Grace...that's funny coming from you. I've no doubt you'll lay huge amounts of groundwork out of feelings of concern, anyway."

"I'm talking about preparation. It's impossible to quiet all dissenting voices," Duke Qumildy said.

"Well... Not an insignificant number of people fail to enter for the exam despite studying diligently at the Magic Academy. Yet here pops up a duke's daughter to take the practical. We'll hear a complaint or two. What worries me is the possibility that such people will interfere during the final exam."

"I see, yes. That's an issue."

Surprised by the point Borden raised, I mumbled involuntarily. The way I see it, if they have free time to disturb people, they should use it to hone their magic, but, unfortunately, there seemed to be a certain number of twisted individuals out there with that kind of personality.

"An issue for you, Viol. Don't forget that," Borden snipped at me.

"We built a wall to protect this country," I countered coolly. "I'm pretty sure we can protect one Mage from saboteurs."

"Hahaha, a great answer! The kind I'd expect from the Archmage of the Third Mage Guild, a man the whole country relies on."

Rats, I forgot the king and queen were present. But everyone laughed, and no one seemed offended. Eh, no worries then.

"If Archmage Viol is around, Seren's safety can be ensured, but it would be better to make the announcement after the exam results are out. And if there

any doubters, showing this Recording Orb to the citizens, showing them Seren's true might...that should quiet them up."

"Anyone with knowledge of magic would have to recognize Lady Seren's ability. I do not foresee any issue there."

"G-Goodness gracious!"

As I agreed with the king, Lady Seren jumped in with a flustered look.

"I'm nowhere near as good as you say. I am still just a beginner at magic... I don't want to make myself conspicuous!"

"Don't talk foolishness. After you felled a mid-ranking magical beast with such ease?"

Borden muttered in amazement, but it was true. Lady Seren hadn't studied magic very much at all. She hadn't had much time, but in the limited time she had, she'd learned enough to make your eyeballs pop out.

"Ah, the only spells I could confirm from the battle record were Wind Wall, Wind Cutter, Wind Bomb, and Wind Manipulation," I said.

"Isn't that almost all elementary magic?!" Borden cried.

"Yes, isn't it amazing, the results she got just with that? Just by manipulating the wind," I said.

"Wind manipulation... Just lifestyle magic..." he muttered.

"Right? Fascinating, isn't it?" After silencing Borden, I looked at Lady Seren. "Lady Seren, when you pass the exam, I will be responsible for your ongoing education. Don't worry."

"R-Right!"

"Hmm. Yes, if Viol teaches her, I suppose there's no need for concern..." Mumbling to himself, Borden seemed to be mulling it all over. More thoughts than I could ever measure must have been swirling in his head.

Borden eventually lifted his head and smiled reassuringly at Lady Seren.

"Lady Seren, as the rumors say, Viol is a man who has a lot of trouble communicating with others, but when it comes to magic, he's very dependable.

I, too, was tutored by him at the Magic Academy. Both his teaching and his battle support are second to none. I believe you can feel secure in trusting him.”

“Hey, what do you mean when it comes to magic?” I griped.

“It’s true. If she judged you based on your terrible ballroom dancing, she’d have no confidence in you. I was hoping to reassure Lady Seren,” Borden sneered.

“M-My dancing has nothing to do with this!”

Lady Seren, please don’t laugh with such obvious enjoyment. And you, Helios. Don’t look so secretly relieved. I’m Archmage of the Third Mage Guild, don’t forget. I’m fully confident in my professional ability.

“Thank you. But my magic all began with the rejuvenation spell Lord Viol taught me. I have complete faith in Lord Viol’s teachings.” Lady Seren stepped in front of me, gracefully bending forward and bowing to me. “Lord Viol, when I become a High Mage, please guide me.”

Lifting her face and smiling, Lady Seren had never looked more adorable, perhaps because her burdens had been lifted.

“Then the policy going forward has been decided.”

As the king smiled, Prince Helios turned to face his father with a hint of tension.

“Could you entrust me with informing the citizens and the aristocracy of these new developments?” he requested.

“But it won’t be long until the final High Mage exam results come out.”

“I understand. However, I would like to take responsibility for announcing this matter. Just as this country and Seren are about to change, I also want to choose my own future. I need to change, too.”

The prince had a lot on his mind, but it sounded like he’d made a decision about something already.

“Very well. If you’re as determined as you seem, I’ll leave it to you.”

His Majesty's eyes crinkled happily. Then Borden turned toward Prince Helios.

"If you're willing to handle the PR, Prince Helios, that will make things easier on my end. Leave the internal matters to me. Lady Seren's loss will leave a big hole, but if possible, I'll do what I can to smooth over any anxieties," Borden said, grinning in a terrifying way.

He would use whatever methods were necessary. Internal matters... Well, the inner workings of the aristocracy were a mystery to me, anyway.

"Seren... So... You're really not going to become our daughter?" The queen, who had not uttered a word since her husband silenced her, now muttered in deep sadness. Seeing it made my heart hurt a little. Her Majesty must have really loved Lady Seren.

"It's not like you won't be able to see each other again. Once Seren learns to make magical devices, you can commission her to make personal items for you. ...Please, dear, don't cry."

I was secretly surprised when the king consoled the queen in a soft, crooning voice that was far from dignified. I wondered if His Majesty was like this in private.

He lowered his eyebrows and looked at Lady Seren while lightly stroking the shoulder of his wife beside him.

"Seren, I believe Sheila will be lonely without you. Once you become a High Mage you must come and see us."

"Your Majesty... Certainly, I will become a splendid High Mage, and come to see you!"

The king truly was a gracious man. When he'd accepted the advice of my predecessor, the former Archmage, and chose me, a commoner, as the new Archmage... I'd felt the same thing then, too.

"Archmage Viol."

"...Yes?"

"Keep this confidential. In particular, do not let the Council know of this. High Mages are the lifeline of our country. Trial rulings must always be strict."

“Don’t worry about that. As I said, I do not intend to comment on the exam procedure in any way.”

“Hmm, yes. I trust your diligence when it comes to magic. Seren. You’ve got a lot riding on this. Do your best, and pass that exam.”

Thus, the secret talk between Lady Seren and the royal family came to an unexpectedly peaceful conclusion.



“I’M exhausted!!!”

That night, I lay on the table in Lady Seren’s private chambers, stretching my paws.

“I’m sorry, I never expected you would be summoned, Lord Viol.” Lady Seren apologized as she held out a forkful of chewy mille-crepe.

When I bit into it and experienced the chewy texture and the sweetness of the whipped cream, happiness engulfed my brain. *Ah, sugar, take all my exhaustion away.*

“I was surprised that you’d set up an audience with the royals so quickly and even more surprised when I was summoned. Why the haste?” I asked.

“Actually, yesterday, in order to save Marietta from falling down the stairs, I had to use magic in front of Prince Helios.”

“Ah, so you had to rush the explanation. Well, as a result, now everything’s been squared with the royals, and you’ve succeeded in getting permission to continue your studies after becoming a High Mage. A good result all around.”

“Absolutely. I expected to be scolded more harshly... I hardly feel I’m worthy of such compassionate understanding...”

“I think they understood how important this is to you, so they didn’t speak to you too harshly. If you’re grateful for that, then all you can do to repay them is show results.”

“Yes, I’ll do my best. But sometimes, please share some of your energy with me, like this.”

After saying that, Lady smiled and stroked my lustrous fur with a blissful expression. Of course, I would not hesitate to cooperate.

In fact, I swore to it.



THE main exam was just ten days after that, and Lady Seren sailed through it without incident. “Oh, is it over?” she asked, looking shocked as she fulfilled the criteria needed.

It was an endurance test to gauge her output and the stability of her magic, but I’d never been worried about it. ...Actually, I allowed myself to swell with pride, seeing that the examiners and the Council were all in quite an excited flutter over Lady Seren’s unconventional aptitude.

Seren 24

Announcement Time

FINALLY... *The day has come.*

I stood stiff and nervous in the gorgeous ballroom.

My bright green dress, a brighter shade than usual, had a beautiful mermaid cut with a shiny finish. Atop the material was a fluffy white lace layer with lovely fresh flowers on the waist. It made me feel cute and refreshed like never before.

My hair was waved, with more volume than usual, and finished gorgeously with fresh flowers woven into the locks. Rince said she'd opted for orange-based makeup to brighten the complexion. "And we mustn't forget the string of pearls!" she had added happily. I was sure she'd spared no effort in making sure my skin looked perfect.

This outfit was an outward expression of my determination.

I wasn't fond of wearing flashy clothes and usually tried not to stand out more than the organizers and important players did at balls, so everyone's eyes would be more focused on the beautiful materials Father found than on me. So far, I've always gone for modesty.

But today, I need to let them know that I've changed.

During tonight's ball, it would be announced that I was to leave the Quimby family and become a High Mage and would no longer be Prince Helios's fiancée.

That would be announced to the aristocracy at tonight's ball, and tomorrow morning, it would be publicized widely inside and outside the country.

The bright green adventurer's clothes had lent me courage during my beast subjugation missions. I wanted to recreate that free feeling, so I chose a bright green dress. A simple mermaid cut dress of the style that was typical of me so far. But, with the addition of lace and fresh flowers, it gave off a gorgeous impression.

I may no longer attend Prince Helios's balls in the future, but that was fine

with me.

To signal the beginning of the festivities, the band began to softly play.

Prince Helios slowly advanced to the center of the dance floor on cue with the music. I followed suit and stepped onto the floor.

As the distance between us gradually decreased, the music increased in volume. By the time we were close enough to touch, the noise around us had died away, and we could only hear the music.

Tonight was the first ball to be hosted by Prince Helios.

It had become a rarity in recent years for a man like Prince Helios, a single man, to host the event on his own, and everyone had been talking about it until just a moment ago. Once the host, Prince Helios, and I finished the first dance, it would be time for the announcement.

This would be the last dance for us as an engaged couple. The thought made me deeply emotional.

Prince Helios, standing in front of me, presented his right hand to me. Every time he performed this act at balls, it struck me as a graceful and sophisticated gesture. Wanting to rise to his level, I accepted his hand with as much grace and poise as I could.



We smiled at each other and followed the dance steps silently for a while. Once we'd gotten into the rhythm of the music and the attention of the crowd on us let up a little, he murmured just above my head.

"This is the last time I can dance with you so naturally like this, Seren."

"...Hehe, that's right. From now on, there may be some fierce competition. Even before now, there was an endless line of ladies desperate to dance with their prince."

Looking up at him, a laugh on my lips, Prince Helios met my eyes with a wry smile. I was used to looking at him, but I was struck again by his beautiful golden hair and clear purple eyes. I'd never see this fearless face of his so close again. With a smile still on my lips, I returned my gaze to the direction of our dancing.

"Listen... Seren..."

A few seconds after I'd averted my eyes, he spoke softly again. Knowing this was the last time, he was determined to make this dance meaningful.

"Yes?"

"Maybe I shouldn't say this now, but..."

After saying that, he clammed up, looking conflicted. I waited, gazing up at him.

I dared not ask him to continue. I, too, had so much I was hesitating to say. I smiled and casually lowered my gaze to his lips.

He held me close for a minute, and we followed the dance steps. Then he sighed lightly from above.

"...No, I don't think I will."

When I looked up, Prince Helios's eyes were on me with a conflicted smile.

The actions I took for Prince Helios's sake turned out to be just me getting ahead of myself. I acted on my own accord and didn't even consult him... I'm sure even Prince Helios must have had a lot he wanted to say to me about that.

But it's very like him, I thought, to swallow his feelings like this.

“...I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

“Why are you apologizing?”

Prince Helios laughed as if he were slightly frustrated. I wasn’t even sure what I was apologizing for.

“I don’t know. But, even though I thought it was the best thing to do, my actions caused trouble for you and many other people. My thought process was far too shallow,” I said.

“It was me and my careless way of speaking that sparked all this. Please don’t apologize.”

“Oh, don’t say that.”

“But, even now, you know it was all a misunderstanding, your desire to become a High Mage hasn’t changed. ...Does that mean you’re really serious?”

“...Yes. Whenever I’m thinking about magic, I’m having fun. It’s what I want to do.”

“Yes, I see that. In the Recording Orb, you were like a whole different person... Beautiful, shining... I mean, you were really cool. I wanted to protect this country with you, but when I saw that battle, I knew I couldn’t stop you.”

I was really cool? Such high words of praise, and they had me stiffening in surprise.

“And... I guess I’m happy,” he said.

“You are?”

“Yeah. I was surprised and shocked at first, and to be honest, I was pretty depressed. But... After you showed me that battle record, Seren... You smiled. Didn’t you?”

I smiled... Did I?

When I tipped my head, unsure, Prince Helios repeated himself, saying, “Yes, you smiled. You said you’d gotten results from your intense study of magic. And you looked so happy.”

W-Was that so? Goodness, I must have seemed boastful. But Prince Helios

was now smiling with an embarrassed look.

“It’s weird. These days, I see your face at that moment before I fall asleep. And it cheers me up.”

“It... Cheers you up?”

“Yes. It’s like... Seren’s found herself.”

Prince Helios said no more then, and I tilted my head again. His words were more childish than usual, and perhaps rather than talking to me, he was just voicing his thoughts.

“I told you once that you and I are alike, didn’t I?” he continued. “I think you and I have been so desperate to do what we should be doing that we haven’t had the time or space to stop and think.”

“Well... I agree.”

“But Seren, through this event, you’ve discovered one thing you want to dedicate your whole life to, haven’t you?”

“Y-Yes, I have.”

“I’m sure I, too, will find that one thing for me one day. Thinking about that makes me feel better.”

“Oh, I hope you do...”

“At the moment, I’m passionate about reforming the salon and the country. This may be ‘the one’ for me... That’s why right now, I’m going to do my best to do what I believe I should while searching for the one thing that’s unique and special for me.” Then Prince Helios smiled. “I want to be like you... I want to speak with pride about my achievements, too.”

“Oh... Helios...”

I couldn’t believe he was thinking like that. With my eyes wide in surprise, I stared at him. It was frustrating, not being able to find the right words, only being able to stare.

“It’s been a while since you called me that.” Prince Helios lowered his eyes sadly for a moment, then regained his cheerful smile. “You’ve finally found your

thing. I want you to lead a life that's true to yourself and then go on to become the object of admiration for the entire nation. I want to be like you, to find a passion to dedicate myself to. A goal I can pursue, a path I choose by myself."

"A goal to pursue... It sounds like such a serious thing," I remarked.

"There's no need to think of it in such heavy terms. If you do things in your own authentic way, you'll find the results take care of themselves."

Prince Helios spoke with such conviction. Before I knew it, the tempo of the dance had slowed considerably, signaling the end of this moment.

"Thank you for everything." Prince Helios stepped back with a smile, bowing with perfect etiquette as usual. "Please dance with me like this every now and then."

And with that, Prince Helios walked away. His back held so straight. So dignified. *Thank you, Prince Helios*, I thought.



SHORTLY after our dance, Prince Helios stood alone at the lectern set up for today in the royal seating area to one side of the dance floor.

Behind the prince, the king and queen watched with calm expressions, implying that the upcoming announcement was their intention.

And we, the salon members, also stood near Prince Helios, waiting for the announcement to begin. Now that it came down to it, I was nervous.

Then, when the prince turned his attention to the nobles at the ball, the band suddenly stopped playing. A strange silence enveloped the venue, and the curious guests emanated an aura of quiet interest and enthusiasm.

After Prince Helios expressed his gratitude to the participants as the host, the audience erupted into loud applause.

The attendees hadn't been told exactly what would be announced during tonight's ball. Even so, with Prince Helios being the host, it was obvious to everyone that this ball was a special occasion.

Tonight's ball was packed. Even guests who rarely attended high society events had come, and the applause was louder than usual. Even though all eyes

were focused on him, Prince Helios stood tall and dignified.

As he lauded the recent achievements of the subjects and the recent successful trade agreement, he projected a different aura than the king, who usually made this sort of address.

A recently developed magical device amplified his voice for the entire audience without shouting. During a big announcement like this, one could really appreciate how effective it was.

I was deeply moved. From now on, I would not only receive the benefits of magical devices like this but also be on the creative side, making useful and innovative inventions myself.

“He looks so dignified.”

“I always thought he was a little unreliable, but it looks like he knows when to pull it all together.”

Lady Linde and Lady Ladia whispered nearby. I’d witnessed Prince Helios’s speeches and interactions in diplomatic matters before, so I wasn’t surprised, but they seemed impressed and a little taken aback.

“...And now...”

After finishing his opening address without any flaws, Prince Helios continued. It sounded like it was finally time. My spine went rigid by reflex.

“As you all know, one of our current policies is to further open the door to civil and military official positions so that the people can exercise their power in the right place, regardless of gender or social status.”

From there, Prince Helios said that from next spring, the quota for women and commoners being promoted to civil office and for women in military office positions would be increased. Anyone would be considered, regardless of his or her status or gender.

The venue buzzed with excitement, and Prince Helios continued: “Those who are permitted to participate in the salon will work alongside us, the current members of the salon, and will be trained so they can be promoted to civil positions immediately upon graduation.” As he finished, the commotion in the

ballroom increased.

“Hehe, things are getting interesting. See how the crowd’s reacting?” Lady Ladia muttered in an amused tone.

“The households that don’t have children Prince Helios’s age will support the push for more commoners being appointed. It’ll be a chance for them to earn brownie points with the crown,” Lady Linde said.

“Yikes... Better hope the common people aren’t used as pawns in a game.”

“If it’s to everyone’s benefit, what harm could it do? It’s up to the individual to seize the opportunity or get preyed upon.”

“You’re as harsh as ever.”

Lady Linde and Lady Ladia were whispering behind their fans, and indeed, what they were discussing was a concern.

Whenever there’s an attempt to do something different, new problems will emerge.

But in the salon these days, Prince Helios had more friends than before. Friends who will think closely about every issue. I had no doubt Prince Helios would be well-supported.

“What I’ve just mentioned will become the new status quo in the spring. Before announcing it to the nation tomorrow, I would like to announce two other propositions in particular.”

Oh, here it comes. My heart started hammering.

“Firstly, as a trial stage for the system changes next spring, we will appoint three women to the salon.”

Lady Linde, Lady Ladia, and Marietta stepped forward as Prince Helios spoke.

“Lady Linde of the House of Duke Tyde, Lady Ladia of the House of Count Hapisery, Lady Marietta of the House of Duke Qumildy. Currently, I am having them troubleshoot to avoid any major issues ahead of a proposed policy change next spring.”

As he spoke each name, they bowed gracefully. All were perfectly poised.

Perhaps because they knew there would be an announcement today, the three had dressed elegantly and modestly to project an intelligent impression with less glitz and glamour than usual.

Perhaps because some of the nobles had already heard about it, the announcement seemed to be received calmly, without any particular commotion.

Since the daughters of the main families of each faction were selected, there was no reason for there to be any openly dissenting opinions. I was relieved for a moment but tensed up again. After all, it was my turn next.

“And one more thing. We have decided to abolish the royal family’s arranged marriage system.”

When Prince Helios made that declaration, the hall fell silent.

I thought there would be an uproar, but everyone stiffened, eyes focused on me. Then their bewildered gazes moved from the king and queen to Prince Helios and back to me.

Sensing the signs of commotion, Prince Helios immediately followed up.

“I understand this matter has been an unspoken convention for over twenty years. However, we have concluded that this tradition is incompatible with our new policies. Our new policies allow people to demonstrate their abilities in the right place, regardless of gender or social status, and to choose a career based on their talents and desire to enrich their lives.”

The noise in the ballroom increased.

“What does this mean?”

“What about Lady Seren?”

“The new generation is coming up. We’re all expecting a wedding soon.”

“He can’t be serious.”

“No, no, impossible.”

The noise grew louder and louder until I could make out what people were saying. And from the salon members waiting around me, I was also getting

some questioning gazes. I didn't know how to react, so I looked straight ahead, waiting for Prince Helios to continue.

"Therefore, I am canceling my engagement with Lady Seren."

But as soon as Prince Helios said that, in a smooth tone, the ballroom broke out into angry voices.

"Canceled?!"

"Lunacy!"

"You must be joking?!"

Some people sounded astonished, but excited women's voices were in the mix. Some people were stunned and couldn't speak. I realized that this engagement cancelation was impacting those around me more than I'd expected.

Once the surprised shouts started to calm down, everyone started exchanging words with the people around them. It grew so loud I could no longer make out what people were saying, and that was a little scary. But no matter what they were saying, I had no choice but to accept it.

I had to stay calm, as always. Straighten my spine and keep my head held high. With a smile on my lips, I turned my face to where the invited guests were lined up.

"What's the meaning of all this?"

Someone with a fan leaned in to speak to me. It was Lady Linde, talking to me behind the cover of the fan.

"Who else can be princess consort if not you? What's happened?"

"Hey, this is the first we're hearing of all this, you know? I must insist you tell us everything later."

Lady Linde sounded uncharacteristically angry, and Lady Ladia's tone was cold. Goodness, I had to get ready to face a lot of backlash.

Seeking comfort, I looked to Marietta, who understood the situation. She smiled and nodded to reassure me. Everyone else, though... They looked

surprised, bewildered, worried... And Lord Riesz wore an expression that was impossible to identify.

“S-Seren... Is this true? What could have...”

“Seren, a moment?”

Almost at the exact moment that Lord Riesz was trying to talk to me, Prince Helios called me over. Giving Lord Riesz a brief smile, I gazed up at Prince Helios.

“To the podium, please.”

His voice was kind as he urged me forward.

Taking his outstretched hand, I stepped onto the stage where Prince Helios stood. When I stepped onto the stage, I could hear the crowd’s murmuring clearly, perhaps because of some special acoustic setup.

“No one told us about this.”

“It’s all too sudden.”

“The prince must be a fool.”

And other voices, saying I was a drab princess, too dull for the prince. That I had been found lacking and discarded.

Someone from the salon gossiped excitedly about how the new fiancée would surely be Marietta.

Other voices gleefully discussed how this meant there was still a chance.

Voices also speculated there may have been an invisible feud between the royal family and House Quimby.

However, those voices were scattered. The majority of what I heard was genuine surprise, disappointment, and worry about my future. I felt such gratitude for the people who were saying things like that.

It was so unexpected I must have looked shocked. But then Prince Helios nodded gently at me. Once he made sure I was positioned properly on the stage, Prince Helios smiled at the crowd and addressed them again.

“I apologize for the shock.”

When he spoke, the ballroom finally fell silent. Seeing how calm Prince Helios was, everyone else seemed to regain their composure.

“There seems to be a lot of doubt and anxiety. I want you to know that I understand your concerns.”

Prince Helios spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully.

“As you all know, Seren completed her training as a princess consort to a perfect standard, and everyone has recognized her high ability and hard work. I understand many of you may believe there is no substitute for Seren.”

The commotion died away to nothing. The only sound in the ballroom was Prince Helios’s voice.

“However, I, the King, and the Queen, believe that she will achieve great results in the new path she will take in the future, and this will be a huge benefit to the nation... No, I’m sure it will benefit the whole world.”

The whole world...? That was a huge claim.

The crowd didn’t seem to understand what Prince Helios was saying. I, too, wasn’t sure what kind of expression would be appropriate to have as I stood there in front of everyone.

“Seren will become a true treasure for this country in the future. ...As a High Mage, she will be a powerful force for you all.”

Then the crowd broke into a thunderous roar of approval, louder than the noise of confusion and dissent moments before.



“OH, it was a masterful display.”

Lady Ladia smiled happily, covering her mouth with her fan.

Tonight’s ball had a strange flow to it. After Prince Helios’s announcements, there were a few brief speeches. After that, it would usually be time for dancing, but because of the major announcements, we discussed the particulars with the non-governmental aristocrats instead.

The king and queen, Prime Minister Borden, and the men of the salon were

deep in discussion with the more prominent nobles, talking about the future in considerable detail.

As for me, I was in the royal section, surrounded by the female members of the salon.

But thanks to that, I was protected from being barraged with questions by excited young women, gossipmongers, and others dying to know the details. Instead, I was able to decompress peacefully.

No one was brave enough to intrude on the royal space just to talk to me. It was kind of everyone to protect me from being bombarded with questions and needless gossipy talk. I felt very grateful.

Of course, Lady Ladia, Lady Linde, and the others in our group barraged me with questions, but there were definitely things we needed to discuss.

I was prepared for that.

“When it was announced that Lady Seren would become a High Mage... Did you see everyone’s faces? Did you see my chipmunk of a father? And my chipmunk-in-training of an older brother? Even in our mansion, behind closed doors, you don’t see that kind of slack-jawed display!”

“You’ve always been particularly harsh with your father and brother. I’m sure we all looked equally dumbstruck.”

Lady Ladia smiled wryly at Lady Linde’s snarky joking comments.

“Well, I can’t deny that. Anyone who hears about a new High Mage is bound to want to bellow, ‘Amazing!’, but then it’s like, wait... Lady Seren can use magic?! And what will happen to the salon, to the duke’s household...? All kinds of questions spring to mind in a rush.”

“Well, that’s true. So, Seren, how did this happen? I feel sad. I was so excited about us all working together.”

Prompted by Lady Linde and Lady Ladia, I took a deep breath.

Of course, I couldn’t tell them everything. But I had no choice but to blurt out the inciting incident and the events that led to it, touching only on the parts it was safe to divulge.

“Well, I overheard some people at the salon saying I was not suited to being the future queen. ...And I wanted to break off the engagement, but I didn’t feel like I could speak up, you see...”

Until recently, I honestly thought all of that was true.

“I thought that if I could become a High Mage, the engagement would be automatically nullified, you see? And I just so happened to start learning magic with Lord Viol, so I decided to pursue it as a serious goal.”

“Pursue it as a goal... But you’ve gone and done it,” Lady Linde said. “My cousin went to the Magic Academy for seven years, but he couldn’t even successfully enter for the exam.”

“You never even seemed to be practicing. It’s so strange. But that frosty Ice Archmage wouldn’t be praising you if you didn’t genuinely have amazing skills. You’ve clearly got what it takes.” When she said that, Lady Ladia reminded me of Lord Viol’s earlier appearance.

When it was announced that I would become a High Mage, there were various excited voices. Of course, like Lady Ladia and Lady Linde, a lot of people doubted my ability to even perform magic. So Prince Helios, who had anticipated this, quickly turned to Lord Viol to dispel any concerns.

I had to smile, thinking back on Lord Viol at that moment.

When Lord Viol was called upon to speak, he stiffened and slowly turned his eyes toward us on the stage.

The line between his brows and his wide-open eyes showed that he was thinking, “What, me?!” and though I’d been at the peak of my own state of anxiety, the sight of him calmed me down in a second.

If he’d been in Vi form, his fur would have been standing on end.

I wasn’t even sure if anyone else had noticed, and that made it even more ridiculous. I secretly bit back my laughter, gazing back at Lord Viol. But he’d risen to the occasion, and without a hint of outward nerves, he’d sung my praises.

Thinking about it now made my heart swell with warmth and feelings of

embarrassment.

“Despite being praised like that... I really don’t have all that much in terms of ability yet. ...But I really enjoy magic and want to spend the rest of my life learning it,” I confessed.

“...Looking so happy...That’s not fair, you know.” Suddenly, Lady Ladia looked troubled. “I was thinking about holding a grudge because you didn’t tell us anything, but I can’t be mad at you when I see that look on your face.”

“I agree. I get that you really couldn’t tell us any details. But I was worried something terrible had happened that had led to this, but no, you seem to be the happiest of us all. We’re the ones who’ll have a hard time of it in the salon when you’ve left, and we’re the ones who’ll have to deal with the gossip about who is to be Prince Helios’s new fiancée, you know?” Lady Ladia had a point, of course, and all I could do was apologize.

“I’m sorry...”

Marietta 4

Whining Shouldn't Be Tolerated

MY sister was smiling.

Like there was nothing to worry about.

I didn't know about Lady Linde or Lady Ladia, but I, for one, knew why my sister broke off the engagement and chose the reckless path of becoming a High Mage. That's why all I could do was smile and watch over the three happily talking.

How could she be smiling?

She'd told me before. About how she couldn't give up so easily. With a sad expression.

Even though she'd worked so hard on her princess training. I never thought my sister's life would change because of our foolish conversation. Because of gossip. Certainly, I was worried about her and Prince Helios, who both worked too hard. And I'd often also thought, *If they could only rely on me more...*

But still, I couldn't believe things had ended up like this.

I never wanted to make her look so sad. She was smiling now, but was it a genuine smile?

Until now, no matter how hard things got, she never complained... Even though she had terrible dark circles under her eyes, my sister always smiled calmly, saying, "I'm fine." So I couldn't tell if even this carefree smile was real or not, and that made me uneasy.

Lady Ladia and Lady Linde shot meaningful gazes at me as I stood there, silently worried.

"But well, now we've finally solved some of the mysteries."

“That’s right. We’ve finally solved the mystery of Lady Marietta’s sudden recent change.”

My sister gazed at Lady Ladia and Lady Linde with a dumbfounded look, but I knew what they were getting at.

“Did something happen?” she asked.

“Ah, well, recently, Lady Marietta started talking with us a lot. She’s asking more questions and debating more, so we wondered what prompted the change.”

Lady Linde smiled softly in response to my sister’s question. I smiled at Lady Linde and Lady Ladia. I couldn’t run away anymore.

“Yes. When I heard that my sister was going to take the exam to become a High Mage, I thought about all kinds of things,” I said, joining the conversation.

A few nights ago, Father told me about the situation and to think carefully about how I would handle myself from now on. Since then, I’ve thought about it over and over again.

I was one of the reasons why my sister had stepped down from the position of future queen and quit the salon. I worried about being at the salon without her and felt so incompetent that I wanted to cry every day.

But I was part of what drove my sister to this, so I wasn’t allowed to complain or whine.

Even if I could never be as good as my sister, I wanted to at least grow and improve to the point where I could be helpful and valued as a coworker.

To be able to do so, I had no choice but to do my best, even if it was all so embarrassing to be a failure right now.

My sister must have had a lot of things she’d wished she could cry about until now, but she’d always worked hard. Feeling encouraged, I gazed straight at Lady Linde and Lady Ladia.

“I knew my sister could pass any exam, no matter how difficult. And if she did, she’d stop coming to the salon, wouldn’t she? So, to make things go as smoothly as possible when that happened, I wanted you two to teach me all

about the work in the meantime.”

After I stated that plainly, Lady Ladia smiled, amused.

“It’s a smart choice. Otherwise, the male members would have continued to find excuses to talk to you, and misunderstandings may have arisen.”

“I wouldn’t want people to think of me that way. Besides...it’s frustrating, but even I realize I’m far inferior to the two of you,” I admitted. “First, I want to catch up with you both.”

“I see. You’re pretty competitive. Like your sister, aren’t you?”

“Hmm, when Prince Helios scolded you, and you left the salon in tears, I thought you were a spoiled brat. But seeing you now... Well, let’s just say I expect big things,” Lady Ladia said.

“Right. We’ll work with you,” Lady Linde agreed.

When the two laughed at me, I struggled to maintain a neutral expression.

Maybe it was because the thread of tension wound tight around me seemed to have loosened. Their acceptance meant more to me than I’d thought.

“Thank you...very much!!!” I bowed to them.

“Hahaha, but please don’t try to be like Seren. No one can be Seren. I have my strengths; Ladia has hers; and you, Marietta, have yours. Let’s make the most of what we each have,” Lady Linde advised.

I felt like I’d been struck by lightning.

Ah, yes, that was right.

There was no need to compare myself to my sister. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t be like her. I should have resolved to do my best in my own way, but without realizing it, I wanted to be more like my sister until that was all I could think about.

It was essential to improve my practical skills, but I should have thought about how I could be helpful at the salon, too.

“Thank you, Lady Linde. I feel like I can do my best...!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my sister smiling happily.

“Hehe, good. She finally smiled a real smile.”

“Indeed. What a fretful pair of sisters.”

I opened my eyes wide, surprised. *They were concerned...for me?*

I was surprised, never imagining I’d be thought warmly of. Not looking at me, Lady Ladia brought her face close to Lady Linde’s in a joking way.

“But Lady Linde is a good person to have in your corner at times like this. Usually, she doesn’t interfere much with other people, though, so this is unusual.”

“I just want to avoid being overwhelmed and crushed by expectations. But if Lady Seren leaves the salon, I’m the next eldest and a duke’s daughter. I have to look out for all of the female members.”

“Oh, please. You’re the one who’s most excited about all this.” Lady Ladia rolled her eyes. “Hey, Lady Marietta, we’re not so weak that we need to be protected, are we? Why don’t we combine our efforts going forward?”

I smiled, and Lady Linde and Lady Ladia chuckled, and I finally felt lighter. My sister was smiling, too, looking relieved. Her friends were much more wonderful people than I’d thought.

Then soft music began to play, signaling the beginning of the dancing.

“Ah, here we go. What an annoyance.”

Lady Linde raised her eyebrows. Lady Ladia patted her shoulder and laughed, “*Hohoho*,” behind her fan.

“Can’t be helped. Off you go, no complaining.”

Lady Ladia saw off Lady Linde, who walked away while groaning but with a smile. My sister, who didn’t know the circumstances, tilted her head and looked curiously at Lady Ladia.

“Lady Linde looks like she is in a bad mood. What could be the matter?” she asked.

“Ah, well, Prince Helios asked her to.”

I nodded, too, my face stiff. “The other day, Prince Helios approached the

three of us at the salon. He wanted Lady Linde, Lady Ladia, and I to be the first to dance with him at balls from now on.”

“Oh my. But that’s...”

“That’s right; now it’s nice and clear. I thought he sounded very clinical and hard to understand. But he promised he would explain the details after the ball was over.” Ladia raised her eyebrows, agreeing with my sister’s reaction. “No doubt, once the news broke about him being free and no longer engaged to Lady Seren, there would be a skirmish. He wanted to get ahead of the rush of hopeful bride candidates.”

I nodded as well. I realized the fact he had specified the order indicated that Prince Helios no longer intended to continue with the old convention of dance partners, with me going second after my sister.

“I thought it was a plan meant to showcase the new salon members, but I didn’t expect this. If this continues in the future, it’s honestly a big risk for us.”

“Yes, isn’t it?”

“Even though we just happened to become salon members around this time, you could hardly blame people for mistaking us as candidates to replace Lady Seren. Linde and I are seriously aiming to be civil officials, and though there’s no rush, these are our prime years for finding our husband candidates. Honestly, Prince Helios!” Lady Ladia sighed.

“Certainly, it will be difficult now for the gentlemen around you to speak to you.”

My sister looked worried, feeling responsible. But then Lady Ladia sidled over to me and, behind her fan, said, “What do you think, Marietta?”

“What do you mean...?”

“About the prince. When he was engaged to Seren, he still invited you to dance at every ball. You must like him, don’t you? Perhaps, in a romantic way...?”

“N-Not at all!” I hurriedly denied it. Prince Helios would not appreciate any misunderstandings about us being romantically involved. “Certainly, I like Prince

Helios... But he doesn't care for me in that way at all..."

Having said that much, I unconsciously bit my lip.

As Lady Ladia said, just looking at my actions so far, I'm sure many people must have noticed I'm in love with Prince Helios. Neither he nor my sister has ever really scolded me. In fact, I've always been indulged by their kindness.

Now I was paying for it. Feeling like crying, I rephrased my words.

"Actually, I feel strongly that he wouldn't appreciate such a misunderstanding going around. I think that's why he said what he did."

"Hmph, are you going to give up?" Lady Ladia scrutinized me with her eyes. But I met her gaze head-on.

"No. If I can first learn to be more helpful to Prince Helios, then I would like to try to convey my feelings to him again."

I've always liked him. I couldn't give up so easily. But I could imagine my starting point was much farther behind the other ladies. It made me want to cry.

"I understand." That was all Lady Ladia said before quickly moving away from me. Then she declared to my sister, "There's no helping it. I suppose I will cooperate with the prince as well."

"Are you sure?"

"Right now, I don't have any particular partner in mind, and I'm sure Lady Linde will say something nice. Like that, we should cooperate with the prince so that he won't have to bother himself with unnecessary matters until the new system is running smoothly. Also, I think Prince Helios might need some time to think about things."

"Hehe, you're also a good person when it comes down to it, Lady Ladia."

"I won't work for free. In return for my cooperation, I expect to be introduced to a man with good prospects later. Well, I wouldn't mind throwing my hat into the ring as a bride candidate for him if I come to have feelings for him in the meantime," she laughed suggestively.

"I see..."

Looking surprised, my sister looked past Lady Ladia to sneak a glance at me. She looked worried, but it was obvious from Lady Ladia's mischievous smile that she was teasing me. *No need to worry, Sister.*

Besides, a lot of people were aiming to be by Prince Helios's side, even if they hadn't said anything out loud.

"For the time being, let's be of service to Prince Helios as salon members. Right, Lady Marietta?"

All I could do was smile back at Lady Ladia as she giggled behind her fan, her eyes unreadable.

She was reliable...but tricky. From now on, daily life at the salon looked like it would be more than a little challenging.

Such Happiness Is a Rare Thing

AHA, I see Prince Helios hurrying towards the dance floor, hand in hand with Lady Linde. Well, I suppose he could hardly dance with Lady Seren's little sister in his usual manner. That wouldn't be wise at a moment like this.

But now that Prince Helios was dancing with a female salon member, it was easier for me to invite Lady Seren to dance. The crowd would observe both of them dancing with new partners and see it as symbolic of the new status quo.

Lady Seren was seated deep in the royal section, so even a high-ranking noble couldn't readily invite her to dance. Still, I caught the redheaded rich boy and Borden's younger brother sneaking covert looks at her. But they were both tied up with the chatter of the old fogey aristocrats, so much so that it was difficult for them to get away and approach her.

I won't get another chance like this. I'd better grab it, right now.

Lady Ladia, who'd just been introduced as a salon member, was chatting animatedly with Lady Seren and her younger sister. I hated to interrupt them, but I had to do it before the redheaded twerp pipped me to the post.

I approached slowly and spoke softly so as not to startle them. "Lady Seren."

Lady Seren turned around and smiled as soon as she realized it was me. So adorable.

"Lord Viol!"

"Congratulations on passing the exam. Your performance during the practical was simply amazing. The council members were taken aback."

"Oh, really?! When the exam ended, I was worried about whether or not it had gone all right."

“Come to think of it, the examiner was surprised when you asked if it was over already. Of course, your performance was flawless.”

Lady Ladia, listening to the conversation between me and Lady Seren, muttered in amazement, “I knew it/ I knew she was something out of the norm.”

But in fact, when it comes to magical talent, Lady Seren is far beyond the norm.

I was pleased to hear Lady Seren being praised, too.

“Usual procedure is that after passing the exam, there’s a grace period of about ten days, and then you’re permitted to debut as a High Mage. But Lady Seren, you have some affairs to settle with the Academy. Let us discuss that matter later,” I told her.

“Well, please give me the same treatment as everyone else. I don’t need any special consideration.”

“Anyone who enters from the Royal Academy, be it you or any other individual, will receive the same treatment. I see how it might look like special treatment, but I assure you, it’s not. Is that clear?” I insisted.

“Yes, perfectly.”

“Then tomorrow... Ah, but that might not be possible. The day after tomorrow, then. Come to the Mage Tower. The Mage Guild will cover the costs, so please take up a residence near the royal palace within the grace period of ten days and then begin preparing to serve as an acting High Mage.”

“A-All right...”

“Sister, are you really going to leave home?”

“It’s the rule. I’m a little worried, but I’ll do my best.”

Suddenly, everything started to get very serious. Lady Seren, too, looked nervous.

I’d taught her how to shop thriftily, but for Lady Seren, an aristocrat’s daughter, living a normal life in the city wouldn’t be easy. I’d have to find time to teach her a thing or two.

“Well, practical discussions can be saved for later,” I said. “Actually, I didn’t come here to talk about this sort of thing.”

“R-Right.”

I slowly held out my hand to Lady Seren, who still looked uneasy.

“Lady Seren, I’m delighted to have one more capable colleague. To celebrate this day, would you care to dance with me?”

“Oh, Lord Viol...!”

Lady Seren looked up at me with a bright smile. In the bright green dress reminiscent of the adventurer’s garb she wore during the subjugation missions, she looked more vivacious than she usually did at these kinds of balls.

With a pleased smile, Lady Seren took my hand.

“Let’s go.”

With that brief suggestion, I led Lady Seren away from the seats, spotting frustrated looks on the faces of the redhead and Borden’s younger brother out of the corner of my eye. Sorry, but I had no intention of handing over the coveted position of Lady Seren’s first dance partner.

It might be better to keep practicing so that Lady Seren can continue accepting my requests.

While I was still musing about that, we arrived on the dance floor. I took Lady Seren’s hand, as was the custom, and held her back with my other hand. When we stepped gently in time with the music, we finally reached a level of closeness where we could hear each other’s whispers.

For some reason, I found myself deeply moved by the moment, and as I silently followed the steps, Lady Seren suddenly raised her face. Our eyes met, and I stared deep into her amber eyes.

...I could never get used to this.

It’s hard to get used to this feeling of looking down at Lady Seren from such a close distance. *Usually, when we’re this close, I’m a cat, so I simply gaze back up at her. But at this angle, I can see Lady Seren’s small face beneath me and the hem of her dress fluttering as we move.* It was a special view; I couldn’t tear my

eyes away.

“Hehe.”

For some reason, Lady Seren giggled bashfully.

“What?”

“Ah, it’s just... I can’t take my eyes off you... I’m a little embarrassed,” she said.

“E-Excuse me. I must have been staring.”

“Oh, but I’ve been staring at you the whole time as well, so I suppose we’re even.”

With another small smile, Lady Seren averted her eyes. At times like this, my wits desert me. I had nothing smart to say.

“Um... The dress you’re wearing tonight suits you more than usual.”

“Really?!”

“Ah, yes. Well, even though it’s brightly colored—the same hue as an adventurer’s outfit—it’s also subdued and elegant, and it suits you very well. Honestly, I don’t know much about dresses and ladies’ attire... How do I say this... You look beautiful tonight, Lady Seren.”

“...Thank you.”

Lady Seren blushed, and this time, she lowered her head. I’m not good at embellishing or choosing my words eloquently, so I might have been too blunt.

Maybe I should have asked Borden if I should be using specific aristocratic turns of phrase.

“...But you know... I’m so glad,” I muttered.

“Pardon?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Since Lady Seren had turned her head down, I’d been looking around vaguely and commented without even realizing it. Despite people sneaking glances at us and the clear whispers around us, I’d let down my guard for a moment. Likely

because their gazes didn't feel particularly hostile.

"What are you glad about?" she asked.

"Ah, well... I was worried that things might get even more confused and out of control, but I'm glad, you know, that things went so well. Enough for us to be able to dance calmly like this. I suppose I was just thinking out loud."

Lady Seren giggled, clearly amused, but honestly, I'd been genuinely worried. I'd been fully prepared to use muffling magic if there was a lot of booing and cursing. But it turned out most of the voices registered surprise or a desire to gossip, and there was no alarming behavior that might frighten Lady Seren.

With Lady Seren absent, the aristocrats, fearing their own work would be affected, went to the king and queen, quibbling over specifics and asking, "Must this be done now?" but on the dance floor, most of the nobles still seemed half in doubt, as if the new changes hadn't sunk in yet.

As Prince Helios said earlier, the issue of the crown prince's future bride being predetermined had been discussed for the past twenty years.

The king, the queen, and Prince Helios were rather innovative, flexible types who sought to abolish meaningless traditions and actively incorporate good initiatives seen in other countries into their own.

But, since the arranged marriage system itself hadn't changed, I suspected some troublesome opponents out there were targeting the next generation, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

"I also...assumed that if I announced that I was breaking off my engagement to become a High Mage, I would receive backlash for being selfish, despite being lucky enough to have been a future queen candidate, and that I would be branded disrespectful to the royal family, and irresponsible to the citizens. This reaction was quite unexpected. It might be because Prince Helios gave the impression that the abolishment of the fiancée nomination system was a national decision."

"Yes, I think that was a major factor. It seems that came across to the Council, too."

"I am glad that, in the end, I discussed everything in advance... Honestly, I'm

very grateful to you.”

From Lady Seren’s intense gaze, I felt her gratitude.

She was thanking me for convincing her to consult with her father in advance, but she made the decision, and her father and those around her worked extremely hard in response to that decision.

“You’re blessed with a strong community around you,” I said.

“Yes. I feel that now, more than ever. Father... Prince Helios, the king and queen, Prime Minister Borden. I’m sure there must have been a lot of troublesome things that needed handling that I wasn’t even aware of. Also...”

“Also?”

“I realized leaving will cause far more trouble than I could ever have expected.”

“It can’t be helped. If that’s how you feel, though, you should reflect, be grateful, and repay your debt by providing results. Your first priority is to improve your skills as a High Mage.”

“Yes! I’ll do my best!”

Lady Seren’s honest declaration to do her best sounded exceptionally loud, although perhaps it was just exuberant.

The ladies and gentlemen dancing nearby suddenly looked at us, smiling. Looks intended to cheer on a young person about to make the leap into a new environment.

Come to think of it, I also remember being looked at like that when I attended a ball after becoming a High Mage.

That’s when I realized elderly people, who would normally be chatting instead of dancing, surrounded us.

I didn’t know if it was an order from the royal family or an acquaintance of Lady Seren’s, but it served as a buffer between us and the gossip-loving younger generation. Even without magic, it’s possible to do something like this. I was a little surprised by the possibilities of dance.

Although it felt like a protective formation, I still needed to be careful about what I said while surrounded by so many battle-hardened benefactors.

I instantly cast a recognition inhibition spell.

“Lady Seren?”

“Yes?”

“Right now, I’ve cast a spell of recognition inhibition that will make it impossible for others to hear what we’re talking about. You can speak freely now.”

“Oh my, when did you do that?”

“They can still see us, so bear that in mind.”

“Hehe, what is there to see? We are simply dancing.”

“Maybe I should be more careful. Apparently, when I’m with you, I somehow become more expressive.”

“Yes, please be careful. You’re still smiling a little, you know?”

Now that we didn’t have to worry about what we discussed, she responded teasingly, and I felt at ease.

“But now, you’re neither Prince Helios’s fiancée nor a duke’s daughter. You are simply a High Mage.”

“Yes... It’s kind of like a dream.”

“Certainly. Even though we’ve only been together for about three months, it was an intense time.”

“Me too. I feel like a different person than I was three months ago,” she said.

“Well, three months ago, you wouldn’t have dreamed of flying around in the sky and subjugating monsters like giant bears and wild boars that even seasoned adventurers fear.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t feel like losing.”

After saying that with a straight face, Lady Seren smiled happily, and her expression lit up with joy, the tearful expression she wore when we first met

seemed like a mere illusion.

“...You’ve grown more positive. Lately, I feel like all I see on your face is a smile.”

I spoke without thinking, but Lady Seren instantly looked stunned by my words. Then, she smiled like a flower coming into bloom.

“...You could be right. I certainly laugh a lot more than I used to.”

Exactly. She used to smile shyly, secretly, all the while bearing a heavy burden, but these days Lady Seren’s smile speaks of the joy and fun she is experiencing.

Of course, at balls like this, there were many old-fashioned, modest smiles from her, but more and more, I spotted natural smiles like this. Yes, I really loved Lady Seren’s natural smile.

“Every day shines brightly before me now. As part of my wind magic, I observed the movements of the wind closely and realized the world I thought I knew was full of surprises. Even a single piece of dust that swirls upwards is an important element that gives me vital awareness. ...When I look at things from such a new perspective, everything feels fresh.”

Now, this made me smile.

I was the one who recommended wind magic, but I never thought that it would have such an effect. Lady Seren’s power of observation surprised me when I was instructing her, but she loved even trivial things like dust motes, the things that no one sees, and she learned from them and transformed them into a source of strength.

I felt like I’d caught a glimpse of the truth behind the mystery of her rapid advancement.

“Are you studying anything right now?” I asked.

“Yes. Many people are dancing here, so the wind flow is complicated, and the dance floor is a particularly spectacular whirlwind. A whirlwind kicked up here could grow into the destructive power of a storm with just a little coaxing,” she said.

“Now, that sounds dangerous. It would be effective in wartime, but in

peacetime, it may not be useful.”

“Well, that’s for the best.”

How fearsome. It looked like she was dancing, but she was watching the wind and unconsciously thinking about how to use it.

“You really are a capable hand, Lady Seren.”

“Well, I hope I will be, but...”

“What is it? You suddenly sound unconfident.”

Lady Seren lowered her eyebrows as she spoke. I wondered what was wrong, and then she whispered to me.

“Since I haven’t graduated from the Magic Academy... There are many things that everyone else knows as common sense that I simply don’t know.”

“That can’t be helped. We will make plans for accurate magic and attribute measurement and basic magic education, and I will provide guidance and support as much as possible, so you don’t have to worry.”

“But, also, until now, far from renting a house by myself, I’ve had everything taken care of by the people around me. I’ve started worrying about whether I can live on my own.”

“Well, your father can help you with housing arrangements. Those from noble backgrounds tend to retain the employ of some servants from their family homes. As you say, Lady Seren, there are many who don’t know how to live on their own at first.”

“Well, in that case, there’s no problem, I suppose.”

“The treatment is that of a high-ranking noble. There is no problem at all. Since I am from a commoner background, it’s not comfortable for me to have in-home help, so I hire a housekeeper who comes daily. People have different ways of living, such as independently or in a place that provides meals and bathing facilities. Some hire live-in servants. There are all kinds of ways to make it work.”

Lady Seren looked relieved. Seeing that expression, I felt reassured, too.

“I will teach you how to live in the city when I have time, and everyone is well-versed in providing support. If you have any concerns, don’t swallow them; just speak up,” I told her.

“Understood. I’ll probably cause a lot of trouble for everybody. Now that I know I’m going to be a High Mage and can think about it calmly, I realize there’s so much I can’t do... I said I didn’t want to have any special treatment, but it looks like I’m going to cause a lot of inconvenience, and that makes me feel so small.”

“Lady Seren, that’s enough.”

“Hm?”

Lady Seren looked up at me, dumbfounded. I looked down at her seriously and spoke slowly and persuasively.

“We understand your current situation and think you should be hired as a High Mage even after considering the educational and personal support you may need. Please, do not stress over these matters unnecessarily.”

“Oh, Lord Viol...”

“You’re jumping into a new environment. There are many things you won’t be able to do, and there are times when things won’t go your way. But there is no need to fret over every little thing. No one’s an expert at everything at first. But spend a little time, and you’ll soon learn. Right?”

“...You’re right. There’s no point churning over it. I know I’m being silly.” Lady Seren smiled softly. She seemed to have calmed down a little now.

“Besides, we’re wasting this special dance. Let’s leave aside all the heavy things and enjoy this moment, shall we?”

“Oh, Lord Viol...” Looking up at me, Lady Seren smiled. “Really, you’re right. It will be such a waste if we don’t enjoy this precious moment.”

“If you wish, I can cast a stronger recognition inhibition spell. You like to use the whole dance floor, don’t you?”

“Your dance skills are improving rapidly, too, Lord Viol. A dynamic dance sounds appealing, but... I think I’ll keep things subdued and understated for

tonight.”

I was pleased to have my dance skills subtly praised.

A skilled dancer like Lady Seren could gauge the true caliber of her dance partner. Ah, but it’s true, I’m relying on my body more than ever before. We’re closer, with better timing, and our steps don’t feel out of place. We were perfectly in sync.

Hmm, I’m definitely improving. Averting her eyes from me as I danced away, quietly pleased, Lady Seren mumbled something else.

“Also... It makes me happy to dance slowly with you like this.”

I could say the same!!!

Such happiness in a moment like this was a rare thing indeed. I decided to enjoy my time with Lady Seren to my heart’s content, trying not to embrace her too tightly.

A New Step, for Me and the Black Cat

WHEN Lord Viol said it would be fine for him to cast a stronger recognition-blocking spell and he would also like to use the whole floor to dance, I was a little shaken.

Because the last time we danced like that, I had a lot of fun.

He'd told me how Count Blaze had given him a pass at the basic level, and he was learning how to boldly use the floor as he took my hand and spun me around in a way that was so fun, so joyful.

When I remembered that exhilarating feeling of spinning through the dancing crowd together, I wanted to dance like that again. I knew when we took the first step that he'd continued training and improved even more than last time.

But tonight, I couldn't afford to be as conspicuous as I was back then.

I'd thought I wouldn't be attending any more balls, but the announcements had taken place during a ball, so I was happy to have had this one final chance to dance.

Tonight, though, I was no longer free to converse with all kinds of people in the way I used to.

Lord Viol knew the circumstances, so there was no issue there, but it would be difficult for me to dance with anyone else. Especially because, when you're dancing one-on-one, there's a limit to how much you can avoid making conversation.

After this, it would be best for me to greet the king and queen and then return home. This event, painstakingly set up by Prince Helios, would only be effective if it ended without incident.

“Your dance skills are improving rapidly, too, Lord Viol. A dynamic dance sounds appealing, but... I think I’ll keep things subdued and understated for tonight.”

When I said that, some of the tension left Lord Viol’s face.

I was pleased that I noticed subtle changes in his expression. Bold dances were fun, it’s true, but a gentle dance like this has an appeal all its own.

“Also... It makes me happy to dance slowly with you like this.”

I would not be attending any more balls for a while. I didn’t know when my next chance to dance with Lord Viol would come, and so I wanted to cherish this moment.

Perhaps because of those thoughts, when I realized that I had been staring at Lord Viol’s face, I casually averted my gaze.

The silver clasp I had gifted him shook with his movements. The thin chain that flowed elegantly from his collar to his lapel, the glittering star detail under the moon-shaped clasp... The whole piece swung and swayed in tune with his gentle movements.

He’s...wearing it again tonight.

I was so thrilled my chest filled with warmth.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Pardon?”

“I mean, you’re really staring. You’re about to burn a hole right through my chest. Is something wrong?”

“I’m sorry! I was looking at the clasp and thinking about how beautiful it was. It’s really splendid, shimmering and swaying away like that.”

Embarrassed over being caught staring at him, I panicked. However, Lord Viol’s brow softened like he was relieved.

“Oh, I thought my manners had failed me and I’d done something wrong. I’m not used to this kind of thing, you see.”

“Oh, not at all! You’re perfect! Not a foot wrong!” I rushed to assure him.

“Good. Well, I understand why you’d be fixated. This clasp’s subtle design is really top-notch. I’ve taken a shine to it myself. Why, I wear it every single day.”

“Every day...”

I was thrilled he liked it so much. Gazing at the swaying silver clasp, I smiled involuntarily.

“I’m looking forward to it, aren’t you?” he suddenly said.

“What’s that?”

“What, you say? Well, you joining us at the Mage Tower, of course.”

“Th-Thank you very much.”

I was surprised, but Lord Viol’s eyes were so kind as he looked down at me. He really was looking forward to it.

I spoke only of my anxieties earlier, but I couldn’t contain my excitement when I thought that from now on, I would be able to confine myself to the Mage Tower and think only about magic every day.

Besides, I was happy to be able to work with Lord Viol.

Of course, Lord Viol was a busy man, so it might not be possible to meet with him so easily. But compared to now, where I’d had no chances to encounter him at work, I’d be seeing much, much more of him, and what a happy thought that was.

Rationally, only about three months had gone by since I started spending time with Vi and Lord Viol, but their existence had already become indispensable to me.

However, now that I’d passed the High Mage exam, we didn’t need a pretext to meet anymore.

When I believed that Vi was just a familiar, I used to say embarrassing things to him, like “Please come again next time” and “I miss you,” but I could never ask the busy, important Lord Viol to “Come and see me.” And I had no good reason to go and see him myself.

I hadn’t seen him for a few days since I found out I’d passed the exam until

tonight's ball, and I realized how sad I was without him.

Not knowing when I'd see him again made me even sadder and lonelier. So I was happy just to dance slowly with Lord Viol like this. And seeing him at work would bring me immense joy.

...I think, after all, I... I'm really, really in love with him.

My feelings had grown painfully intense; I couldn't kid myself that they were just a maybe. And so, I wanted to cherish this time that we had.

Lord Viol's leading of our dance was surprisingly gentle and delicate, and entrusting myself to his supportive arms filled me with happiness.

We chatted about this and that. The beautiful line of his neck and jaw and the calmness of his night-black eyes made my heart flutter as I glanced up at him every now and then.

It was like I had an addiction.

I smiled wryly at myself.

Eventually, the music slowed down, heralding the end of this blissful moment.

"Oh, it's over," he said. "I still want to dance, but I suppose there's nothing we can do about it."

"I also wish that we could keep on dancing forever... But today, we cannot."

"True. But dancing with you is so much fun, Lady Seren. Please dance with me again."

He gazed into my eyes, saying things that made me feel such joy. I was made so happy by Lord Viol's kindness that I couldn't help squeezing his hand as it held mine.

"If the day comes when I can attend a ball again... Then, of course, I will dance with you," I vowed.

"Right. It's a promise, then."

"Yes...!"

Sincere Lord Viol. I was sure I could believe those words.

Happiness and excitement swelled within me, and with this promise, I could do my best. My expression loosened unintentionally. I hoped I didn't look too dopey.

I was embarrassed that my emotions must have been showing on my face, so I quickly turned away. Just before the final turn, Lord Viol muttered and sighed in my ear as he drew me close to him.

"I don't want to let you go."

"Huh?" I croaked.

It was a quiet voice, but I definitely heard it.

When I looked up in surprise, Lord Viol jerked and averted his eyes.

Is that really, truly how he feels?

But before I could ask, he released my hand.

Oh, the happy moment is over...!

"Th-That was... Fun," he coughed.

"Y-Yes! For me, too!"

I couldn't say anything more.

"I will undo the recognition inhibition spell."

Then Lord Viol bowed respectfully.

I bowed deeply in return. From here on, our conversation could be heard by everyone. I braced myself.

"Then, Lady Seren, I'll be waiting for you in the Mage Tower."

Lord Viol turned, showing his back. I faced his back and made a solemn declaration.

"Yes! I'll do my best with all my heart and soul!"

Lord Viol's feet came to a stop, and slowly he turned, a wry smile on his face.

"I have heard from many people that you are an exceptionally hard worker. You do not need to exert yourself. Simply proceed at a comfortable pace."

“Thank you...!”

Those words proved Lord Viol’s kindness.



AFTER our dance, I finished greeting the king and queen and left the ball early. The next day, I was alone in my room, preparing for my new, independent life. After the announcement, I expected to be bombarded with questions, so I’d already excused myself from the Royal Academy for the next few days.

I planned to relax and take it easy, but after learning from yesterday’s conversation with Lord Viol that I only had ten days until I had to begin serving as a High Mage, I couldn’t relax.

I consulted with Father last night, and now I was trying to get some things done that I could do by myself, like packing my belongings and making lists of things I needed to get.

To be honest, I tend to get restless when I’m not doing something.

Rince had said that she would accompany me as if it were a foregone conclusion, but I was unsure whether or not that was really all right with her.

I wanted to ask her again, but I felt too timid to interrupt Rince, who had been busy working around the mansion with her sleeves rolled up since the early morning. In the end, I resolved to do what I could by myself.

I wondered what specific items and clothing a High Mage in the Third Mage Guild might need. I was supposed to be mostly resting at home today, but tomorrow I’d have to ask about all kinds of things at the Mage Tower.

As I was thinking, I heard a rapid hammering on my windowpane.

“Lady Seren! Lady Seren, open up!”

A cute black cat was outside the window.

“Oh my, Vi. What’s wrong?”

I hurriedly rushed to the window, quickly opened it, and invited the black cat in.

It wasn’t even Voidday, and the sun was shining brightly outside. I could

scarcely believe that Vi had really come to visit now. I wondered if everything was all right with Lord Viol and his work.

“Sorry, I ran all the way here. Can I have a glass of water?” he asked.

“Um, would a saucer of water be all right?”

“No, I want to drink quickly. Can I have it in a cup?”

“Certainly!”

I poured water into a small, light cup I’d secretly prepared when I discovered Vi was really Lord Viol and handed it over to his small paw.

Holding it with both paws, Vi gulped down all of the water.

“Difficult to down it in one go. ...At times like this, being a human’s more convenient,” he said.

“I would think so.”

“But I didn’t come here to talk about that!”

I was surprised when Vi suddenly let out a loud voice.

“Vi, your voice is a little loud. I have to pack to move, and anyone may come by at any time. It would be better if you tempered your voice a little.”

“Mm, I see. Then I’ll cast a soundproofing and recognition inhibition spell.”

“Thank you. ...So, what happened? Why are you so flustered?”

“Well, I received an unexpected request first thing in the morning.”

“A request?”

“Indeed. Do you know of a magical device that projects an image into the sky?”

“Yes. They use those whenever there’s a big festival or an announcement, right? It’s much more pleasing for a crowd to see a face rather than just hearing a disembodied voice.”

For a long time, in our country, whenever there was an important official announcement, the information was announced all over the country at once using a magical device with a loudspeaker effect. I wasn’t sure how it worked,

but a voice could be transmitted nationwide that way.

When a voice is transmitted, people clamor to see the person speaking. By the time I entered the Academy, speeches given by the king and queen started being projected in the sky during big festivals, and rare acrobatic performances were shown, too, adding color and brilliance.

My heart skipped a beat to think that such an amazing magical tool, the kind that could make such a dream a reality, was no doubt created by a High Mage.

“Apparently, today’s announcement will use that sort of device, but to my surprise, I’ve been instructed to display the Recording Orb you used for your battle entry.”

“Huh? Why?”

I was shocked. All I could do was baldly ask for more information.

“Oh, you didn’t know? Yesterday, a lot of people were asking if you could still at least be appointed as a civil official. The royal house was quite troubled, it seems. Many were skeptical, hearing that you could use magic and were suddenly appointed as a High Mage.”

“Yes, I can understand their suspicion... But, wait. Will my battle record be shown? In the sky, in close-up...?”

“Yes. Once they see that, they will have no choice but to acknowledge your abilities as a High Mage. However, I know you dislike anything too showy, so I thought I should explain the situation to you in advance. I finished my most urgent work and came here in quite a hurry.”

Was he indicating that he had taken time out of his busy schedule to come running breathlessly to let me know? I’d always thought so, but this act reminded me that Lord Viol was surprisingly kind.

“If you don’t want it to happen, I’ll rush back and do whatever is necessary to stop it,” he offered.

“Is it something that the king has decided?”

“Yes. That’s what I heard.”

“So he’s already spoken about it to you. It must be something His Majesty

decided, and my father has already signed off on. If it's the best thing for the country, then I can't oppose it. It's something that happened as a result of me secretly taking the exam to become a High Mage, after all."

"If that's how you feel..."

"But thank you, Vi. I'm sure you're busier than anyone else, but you ran here out of concern for me, right? If you hadn't warned me in advance, I bet I would have fainted when I saw myself reflected in the sky."

"Well, I'm glad to be of help."

"You've been very helpful. I can't oppose this decision... But, honestly, it's terribly embarrassing that people all over the country will see me. I almost can't stand it."

"Yes. I wouldn't like it either. I can't imagine being watched by countless strangers would feel good."

It was so adorable how the little black cat responded with such a solemn expression. Lord Viol hated being seen in public, so much so that he cast spells to conceal himself. He understood how I'd feel about this better than anyone.

But I couldn't believe my battle record would be projected into the sky. Picturing images of me fighting splashed across the sky, I suddenly realized something terrible.

"Wait, Vi. You mentioned the Recording Orb I used for my High Mage exam entry, right...?"

"I told you. It was the only thing I had to hand in."

"Oh no. But I killed a bear in that."

"Yes, you slaughtered a giant bear magical beast with overwhelming strength. That was a splendid battle. Those who have knowledge of magic will understand how amazing a feat that is."

"I don't mean that!" I cried.

Bending the tip of his tail into a "?" shape, Vi tipped his small face to one side quizzically.

“Slaughtering a bear, it just seems a bit... It seems a bit unfeminine, doesn’t it?” I said in a scandalous whisper.

“...Well, I suppose? Hmm. Yes, I suppose it does project a rather aggressive impression.”

Lord Viol was used to seeing female Mages fighting, so he might not think anything of it, but any way you slice it, a young lady who easily slays a giant, frightening bear beast... That kind of thing would be too shocking to the masses!

Forget Princess Drab. I was liable to end up with an entirely new nickname now.

“What should I do? I’ll be too embarrassed to show my face in town!”

But as I began wailing, there was a huge popping sound.

“It’s beginning.”

Vi looked toward the window.

The explosive sound signaled that the official announcement was about to begin. The sound attracted everyone’s attention to the sky, where the gentle, yet dignified face of the middle-aged king was projected.

I picked Vi up and moved over to a chair I kept by the window for reading books. I sat while looking up at the king, who was smiling gently in his usual manner.

Slowly stroking Vi’s jet-black, smooth fur as he lay quietly in my arms, I whispered into his small ear. “It’s about to start... Are you sure you don’t have to return?”

“I still have some time.”

“Oh, good. I couldn’t bear having to watch it alone.”

“...Let’s watch your battle record together, Lady Seren.”

“Thank you, Vi. You’re always so kind.”

When I tightly embraced the warm cat, his tiny ears flicked with embarrassment. When I looked up at the sky again, Prince Helios was taking

over as speaker.

“Let us hear the details directly from Crown Prince Helios, who is leading this matter. Prince Helios, if you please.”

Then Prince Helios was there, projected into the sky. As usual, his face was gorgeous and fearless, and his blond hair was breathtaking. Outside the window, the cheers were as loud for Prince Helios as they’d been for the king.

“Then, I will explain the details. There are many important announcements, so I want everyone to listen calmly and try to understand. I will speak slowly and be as clear as possible.”

Prince Helios’s soft, youthful voice rained down from the sky, so different from the king’s subdued voice. His voice seemed a little more mature than what I was used to.

“Always such a shining figure of a man,” Vi muttered in a somewhat frustrated tone.

Prince Helios, speaking evenly, politely, and at an easy-to-understand speed, was beginning to display a glimpse of his true dignity as a politician. After graduating from the Royal Academy and gaining a few years of experience under the king, I was sure that quality would continue to develop.

When Prince Helios announced the recent changes to the current system, loud cheers of joy erupted outside the window.

“Good. Everyone’s cheers are even louder than last night’s party,” I said.

“That’s right. That announcement was less profitable for the noblemen. Some will be happy that those with superior abilities will be prioritized, but many others feel the privileges of the nobility will be diminished. But that means commoners will have more chances to rise up, so I’m sure they’ll be happy.”

Lord Viol’s frank opinion filled me with happiness. It made me happy to see that what the country was aiming for was also what the people wanted.

The salon system and the way the nation operated would continue to change, but I couldn’t help but hope that it would be a good change for as many people as possible. From now on, I would be in the position of High Mage, and I would

have to think about how to help everyone through the development of magic and magical devices.

“But you know, it’s more interesting to see the reactions of the commoners first-hand instead of being holed up in the royal castle or the Mage’s Tower,” Vi said.

“You took time out of your schedule to come here, so I’m glad it benefited you.”

“It was very helpful. It’s important for the royal family to know the people’s natural reactions. I may suggest a magical device that can give us a rough idea of the people’s reaction upon my return.”

Still staring out the window, Vi relaxed and leaned back on me. His small back and the back of his little head pressed against my stomach, and it was warm and comfortable.

“Also...” Vi snuck a glance up at me, then looked away, continuing in a subdued voice. “I haven’t been able to see you for the past few days, and we didn’t have all that much time at the ball last night... Just being able to meet and talk like this was well worth the trip for me.”

“Oh, Vi...!”

“Woah?!”

I was so happy that I unintentionally lifted Vi up from my knees. While hugging him tightly, I turned Vi’s body from the window toward me and raised him up to my face.

“Do you mean it? I was so lonely too, not seeing you, Vi, or... Or Lord Viol...!”

“I-I-Is that so?”

“But now that I’ve passed the exam, we have no more reasons to meet, do we? I can’t just go and see you... That’s why I’m so happy to meet you today.”

“I’m happy, too.”

Vi agreed with me in a small voice that I wouldn’t have been able to hear if my face wasn’t so close. However, as soon as he said those words, Vi began to flail in my arms.

“Lady Seren, um, put me down. Your face is too close...!”

But as Vi yelped, his fur on end, a sky-splitting roar resounded outside the window.

“Ah, it’s starting.”

A bear-shaped magical beast with a huge body was projected in the sky.

Even though it walked on four legs, it was twice as tall as me. Its forepaws had sharp claws, and ferocious fangs lined its roaring mouth. The figure projected so large in the sky terrified me, even though I had fought and killed the beast.

Even knowing it was a projection, it was frightening. I could hear screams from below the window. But then, those screams turned into loud cheers.

“She’s flying!”

“She is! She’s flying!”

“Like a bird!”

I heard the excited cries of children. The battle had finally begun.

Looking up at the image, I saw myself flying around the giant bear at a considerable speed, then flipping my skirts and soaring high up in the sky, out of reach of the giant bear.

“Oh no. You can see right up my skirt,” I moaned.

The battle was recorded at an upward angle from below so the entire fight could be seen well, with a good sense of realism. I suppose it was inevitable that would happen.

I had no idea. I was so embarrassed. It felt like my face was on fire.

“Don’t be so depressed,” Vi said. “You were wearing undergarments and long boots that go up to your thighs, so there’s nothing on show to fret over.”

“Even so, it’s still embarrassing on principle.”

“Can you hear the voices outside the window? The people aren’t just watching; they’re cheering. Everyone was deeply impressed by the display of power. I don’t think they care about things like your skirts. More importantly, as I said earlier, could you move your face away? I fear heart palpitations.”

“I don’t think you should worry about such trifling things either, Vi.”

I jabbed at him a little for dismissing my embarrassment like that. For me, I couldn’t just move past it.

“See? No problem, right?”

A little sullen, I clunked my forehead against Vi’s forehead, and Vi stiffened, ears, whiskers, and tail pricking up. Then he went limp as if he’d lost all his bones.

I felt I’d gone too far, so I placed him back on my lap and conjured a soothing breeze from above.

I smiled, thinking that Vi was unusually sensitive. But then Vi groggily got to his feet and stared at me with narrowed eyes.

“Lady Seren, you remember that I’m Viol, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then, when I was dancing yesterday, what would you think if I... If I placed my forehead against yours as you did just now?”

“Lord Viol doing such a thing...”

I pictured Lord Viol’s handsome face and his jet-black eyes as I remembered them last night... Slowly approaching me...

My body became so hot that I thought the blood in my veins must have been boiling.

“...No! I couldn’t handle it!”

“Well, that is exactly what you just did to me.”

“I’m sorry... It must have been a terrifying sight.”

Realizing that I had done something so embarrassing and shameful, I felt my skin crawling. I knew, of course, that Vi was really Lord Viol, but when I saw that cute little cat figure, I couldn’t help getting overly touchy-feely.

No wonder Vi was angry. A particularly loud cheer resounded in my ears, even as I reflected on my actions.

My attention caught, I glanced out of the window again just as my barrage of Wind Bombs was about to smack into the exposed belly of the bear, standing with its paws stretched aloft.

The stomach of the giant bear was already stuck with multiple wooden spears, and there was a lot of blood. That alone was a pitiful sight, but it was made worse by the onslaught of the Wind Bombs. I'd heard many children's voices earlier, and now I was worried they might be frightened and crying.

Further aggravating my unease, the giant bear raised a roar from its tattered body, strong enough to shake the forest. In the recording, I saw myself looking down on it from the sky, mercilessly beginning the incantation of a new spell.

The small whirlwind generated at the giant bear's feet grew into a gigantic maelstrom in the blink of an eye, sucking it into the updraft and then slamming it with shocking ferocity against the ground.

The moment the bear was defeated, the city erupted in thunderous cheers.

"Yikes. It sounds like you may not be able to go to town for a while after all," Vi said.

"Yes... How embarrassing..."

"What's there to be embarrassed about? It's the kids I was worried about."

"The kids?"

"They'll probably swarm around you, begging for a flight demonstration."

"That would be cute, but... I was worried they'd be frightened."

"Look out of the window. Everyone's excited. The children are jumping for joy. If you think they're cute now, you might change your mind once they start pestering you and refuse to quit."

"It almost sounds like you have some experience with that."

"They once asked me to conjure up a clay doll to show them, and it spiraled to the point where I was obliged to create whole armies of them for fighting mock battles. Since that incident, I always cast recognition-blocking magic whenever I got to town."

The Archmage of the Third Guild, the Ice Mage himself, at the mercy of the whims of small children. Come to think of it, he mentioned having brothers. Perhaps he was a soft touch when it came to kids.

I was charmed and found myself stroking the back of his tiny head. It must have tickled since the ears flicked like he was trying to shake off water droplets. *Adorable.*

However, Vi, looking down as if thinking about something, suddenly looked up at me, speaking with a serious expression.

“Lady Seren, you should refrain from shopping in town for a while. If you need anything from town, I will accompany you next Voidday.”

“What, really?! Then, you mean we can meet again?!”

I quickly came down to earth after yelping in excitement. *Oh dear, I was about to fully indulge in Lord Viol’s kindness.*

“But... You’re so busy. I’d feel terrible to inconvenience you. I’ve already taken up so much of your precious time.”

“It hasn’t affected my work so far, so it’s not a problem. I’m more worried about you going out into town without my knowledge. That would be terrible for my blood pressure. I will keep you safe with cloaking magic. It’s not the children I worry about; it’s the grown men who might approach you.”

“I don’t think it’s likely that any hopeful suitors will approach me after they’ve seen me decimate a giant bear,” I sighed.

“No, they will. They *definitely* will. It’s not just the town I have to worry about. There’s the royal castle and the Mage Tower, too. I mean, it’s probably illegal to seduce a woman right after her engagement is broken, but they’ll be coming. First come, first served, after all.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. *What nonsense!*

First of all, I already had someone in my heart. Someone so important that I no longer had eyes for anyone else. From now on, even if all I could do was stare at his dignified figure from afar, I was sure no one else would be able to move my heart.

So, even if someone approached me, I would have nothing to say to them.

“Hehe, Vi, you worry so much. It’s all right; even if something like that did happen, I’d turn them down. I’d tell them I’m still not even thinking about that sort of thing.”

“Good.”

Vi nodded deeply, then stopped moving. Then he lowered his ears and slowly looked up at me.

“Well, when will you be?”

“Be what?”

“I mean, how long should you wait, on behalf of the royal family, before you can think about such things without hesitating?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that... I don’t know because there’s no precedent... Three months, half a year, maybe something like that.”

“Then please make it three months.”

“Hehe, well, I suppose I’ll have to consult with Father.”

“Hmm, yes, it might be good to get some advice from the elders.” Vi put his little paw to his mouth and spoke thoughtfully. “From now on, you will be the head of your own household, Lady Seren. You should get into the habit of making important decisions for yourself. When I first became a High Mage, Borden advised me to do the same.”

“...! Yes. Right. You’re right.”

Once again, he reminded me of my new status. Yes, I would be the head of my family from now on.

“Three months would please me. At any rate, please let me know once you’ve made your decision.”

“What?”

“Even I can’t openly court you yet, Lady Seren.”

“Eh?”

C-Court? Did he just say court?!

Lord Viol... Court... Me?

Did I hear it wrong? Was it wishful thinking? I stared at Vi, but he slipped out of my arms and jumped onto the bay windowsill.

His little face, below my eye line, gazed back up at me, and I gazed right back.

“Lady Seren.”

“Y-Yes?”

My nerves flooded over me, seeing him sit there so upright.

Despite his cuteness.

Oh, help me. I saw a flash of Lord Viol’s dignified face as it appeared last night, and I knew my face was burning red.

“When the time comes, I will come to you and convey my feelings for you properly in human form. Until then, I would prefer it if you did not accept any other proposals.”

I sucked in a breath.

Was he... Does this mean...

My heart felt like it was going to explode, and without realizing it, I clutched my chest with both hands.

“Is that a no?” he asked, sounding worried.

“N-N-No way is it a no! I won’t! I won’t accept any proposals from anyone else...!” I rushed out in one breath.

“Really?! Well, great!” His drooping ears, tail, and whiskers all perked up. “Then, when that day comes, I’ll take stock of my assets—all I have to offer you—and I will spruce myself up as much as I can, and I will come to see you...”

“I don’t need anything! You’re more than enough by yourself, Lord Viol!”

“Then will you wait for me?”

“Yes...!”

This isn’t just happening in my imagination, is it?

Lord Viol wants to court me... Then, can I take this to mean that he likes me?

"I'm so relieved." After muttering those words, Vi's upright and tense posture collapsed, and he became loose and floppy. "I hope these three months pass quickly..."

Those words muttered in that quiet voice... What happiness they brought me. I couldn't wait for that day, too.

"I'm so happy... Um, can I... may I touch you?" I asked cautiously.

"What's this now? You were touching me all over until just a few minutes ago. Touch me if you like."

"Well, I suddenly feel embarrassed."

My outstretched hand trembled slightly, and I had to laugh at myself.

Though I'd been touching him so much that he'd scolded me for it, now I couldn't help but see him as Lord Viol as well as Vi, and I felt oddly nervous.

Vi, eyes closed in bliss as I slowly stroked him, suddenly looked up at me as if he had just come to his senses.

"Lady Seren, is it okay for me to come to see you like this from time to time in cat form? I promise not to do anything untoward."

"Oh my, you'll come to see me?!"

"Yes. The time I spend with you is important to me. It really doesn't matter if it's just once in a while... I still want to spend time together."

"Of course! I'll be waiting for you anytime."

I hugged him tightly.

"Lady Seren, too close!"

"Ah, I'm sorry."

I hurriedly moved away, and Vi swiveled his ears.

"While I am in this form, you certainly treat me like a cat. It makes me happy, but I wish you would think of me more as a man."

"I'm sorry..."

I got scolded.

I knew it. This is Lord Viol. This is Lord Viol.

As I stood there thinking about Lord Viol's swooningly handsome face last night at the ball, the black cat sprung from my arms to the windowsill again.

He deftly pushed open the window and glanced back at me.

"Well, no matter. I'm looking forward to when we can spend time together, when I am not a cat, in three months' time."

Seeing me turn bright red from picturing it, the black cat narrowed his eyes with satisfaction.

"Be prepared."



With those brief words, his small body disappeared out of the window.

Lord Viol's face, wearing a satisfied smile. Black hair fluttering in the wind. Black cloak, flapping lightly. I could see it now, superimposed on the form of the black cat, and I found myself unable to move.

"Prepared..."

Spending time with Lord Viol as a human... No magic training... No dancing?

When I imagined potential scenarios, my cheeks burned, and I squirmed.

I knew I could no longer enjoy the soothing effects of hugging Vi and stroking his soft fur. Because it was clear now that we liked each other. Just the thought of talking to Lord Viol at such a close distance made me happy, embarrassed, nervous, and almost unable to bear it.

"Er, will I be able to handle it...?"

I was worried, but I still wanted that day to come soon.

And what joy it was that I could think such thoughts openly and without complication.

Seren 26

The Promised Day

THE day finally came.

Staring at the closed door, I let out a sigh.

How many times had I looked at the door like this? Even though Lord Viol would arrive at the preordained time, I couldn't help but watch the door nervously.

"Lady Seren, please don't stress yourself out. You seem very nervous today."

"N-N-No, I'm not."

I annoyed even myself with my response. Even if I denied it, Rince had picked up on the fact that I was nervous.

Today was the first Voidday in the past three months I'd been working at the Mage Tower. And today was the very first day Lord Viol would visit my residence in human form.

We were to go out together on an outing, but just thinking that Lord Viol would be officially visiting me in human form made me suddenly embarrassed. I wished he would come soon. At the same time, I didn't feel prepared. I couldn't sit still.

And as a result of that, I kept watching the door, sighing heavily. I was blatantly agitated, as I never acted like this whenever I had any other visitors. I knew how obvious I was being.

"Is the Archmage really so scary?" Rince asked.

"Huh?!"

"These past few days, Lady Seren, you've seemed so nervous. I asked around, and I heard quite a few things. The man has a striking face but is non-expressive, and many believe him to be harsh and frightening. After hearing all that, I started to worry for you, my lady..."

"He's not! He's not scary at all!"

I was surprised that Rince was so concerned for me. Rince's sweet concern showed in her worried eyes, but I had the feeling Vi was more scared of Rince than the other way around.

"He's not scary. He's actually a very kind person, you know?"

"Really? Rumor has it that even passersby fear him and that he is strict with his work. Having a boss like him visit you at your residence must be nerve-wracking, Lady Seren."

"Um, I think he's pretty normal at work too, but... Hmm, maybe he is a little scary to certain people?"

"You're not afraid of him then, Lady Seren?"

"No, as I said, he's a kind man. He might be detail-oriented and a little strict, but he's a wonderful and patient magic teacher... And he loves desserts. He's a sweet person."

"Sweet...? Ah, well, if he likes desserts, that explains why you laid out such a spread today."

Rince's eyes were round with surprise. Not many people know Lord Viol likes sweets, but I wanted Rince and the others of my household to know since Lord Viol might visit us more often from now on.

"Yes. Jean made a lot of sweets based on the head chef's instructions and put them in a basket for me. I'm really looking forward to eating them."

"It's been about five years since Jean started studying under Chef Mears. Why, Chef Mears even said that Jean baked better macarons and langue de chats than even he could. I do hope it will suit the Archmage's tastes."

"It'll be fine. After all, the sweets Jean makes are delicious, too."

I was sure it would be fine. I'd moved to this residence three months ago, and Lord Viol had already visited many times as a black cat and enjoyed the sweets. In particular, he said the baked desserts were exquisite. Yes, he'd praised them very highly.

"But still... He's sweet and kind? Are the rumors false, then? Or are you oblivious to the darker side of his nature, Lady Seren? I suppose it could be that

the Archmage reserves his kindness only for you?” As Rince murmured to herself, the bell rang, announcing the arrival of a visitor.

“He’s here!” I leapt to my feet and dashed to the mirror.

Is my hair messy? ...No, it’s okay.

It was bound to be since Rince painstakingly put it up for me and fixed it so I could avoid “Looking slovenly.” The pierced earrings swinging from my ears and the ribbon, gifts from Lord Viol, looked even more lovely than ever today.

Thanks to talking with Rince, I had calmed down a bit. But when I looked in the mirror, I suddenly became nervous again, so I clutched my chest and took a deep breath.

Seeing Rince smiling at me in the mirror, a wave of embarrassment washed over me.

“Don’t worry. You look wonderful,” she said.

Today, I wore the adventure clothes Lord Viol had previously chosen for me. When I first showed her this outfit, Rince scolded me for getting them secretly, but now she seemed to like them as well. To hide my embarrassment, I rushed to the door.

“I’m off, then.”

“Yes, take care.”

I reached for the cart I had parked by the door.

“Really, Lady Seren, you don’t need the cart today, do you?” Rince laughed at me, but I did need it.

“It’s okay. I need it. Today, Lord Viol and I are riding it to the Yarlop Plains.”

“Yarlop Plains... But isn’t that where magical beasts appear?!”

“Yes, but just low-ranking magical beasts. They’re well within my ability to defeat now, and I’ll be going with Lord Viol, so don’t worry.”

“In the cart?! With the Archmage?!” Rince gasped.

“He said he’s looking forward to it. Don’t worry. It’ll be okay!” As I answered the clearly surprised Rince, I opened the door, holding the cart.

“Ah, Lady Seren, wait a moment!” Rince called after me.

“I can’t keep Lord Viol waiting, so I’m going. See you later!”

I closed the door and ran vigorously down the hall. It might have been bad manners, but now that I was not a future queen but a High Mage, no one bothered me about my manners anymore.

“Lord Viol!”

When I ran into the entrance hall, Lord Viol was standing there, dressed in his usual cloak, his glossy black hair tied back.

As he spotted my adventurer’s clothes, his eyes narrowed with pleasure, and his mouth loosened into a smile.

“You’re keen.”

“Hm?”

For a moment, I was confused. Then I saw he was looking at what I was clutching in my hand, and I understood. Because I’d shown up with the cart in hand, he’d figured I was planning to head to the plains right away.

“Of course, I’m keen to go... But would you like some tea before that? Even if we rest and relax a little before leaving, we’ll still have plenty of time.”

“No, let’s head on out. We can always relax after we’ve arrived at our destination.”

Lord Viol dismissed my proposal. I felt a little disappointed but also relieved.

I mean, at the Mage Tower, we were boss and subordinate. During working hours, we had to speak to each other in proper and businesslike tones. And Lord Viol had only ever visited me at home in the form of...a little black cat.

I hadn’t participated in any high society events during these three months, either. It had been a long time since I’d talked to Lord Viol in his human form without work being involved.

It would be embarrassing for the people serving in my household to see me obviously nervous. It would be better for Lord Viol and me to be alone as soon as possible.

...Embarrassing, though.

“Gria, can you open the door for me?”

The door was opened at my request. I lowered the cart to the floor, put my foot on it, and floated it up slightly. *Good, it seems like my magic is stable today as well.*

“Lord Viol, please get on behind me.”

“Right.”

After making sure Lord Viol was aboard, holding on to the handle, I floated us up even higher.

“Lady Seren! Here!”

“Oh, thank you!”

Jean, my personal chef, who’d accompanied me to my new home from my father’s residence, handed me the usual picnic basket.

I’d asked for easy-to-eat snacks and plenty of sweets, but since Jean was originally a specialist in making desserts, I was confident today’s offerings would be spectacular.

“It smells so sweet... So delicious...”

I looked over my shoulder toward the happy voice to see Lord Viol smiling.

“Wow...”

Seeing Lord Viol’s precious smile up close, Jean let out a small sigh. I was a little impressed. Even men couldn’t help but fall in love with him.

Lord Viol was no doubt curious about the contents of the basket. It would be better to reach our destination early and relax once we got there while checking it out.

“We’re off!” I shouted out to my staff, then accelerated without further delay.

For a moment, I could see everyone’s surprised faces, but in no time, I’d passed through the doorway, and my house grew further and further away. Come to think of it, it might have been the first time that I’d flown at such a speed in front of everyone.

Actually, it had been a long time since I'd flown through such a large, open space at such high speed.

The wind felt so good.

"Lord Viol, it's not too fast for you, is it?" I asked.

"It's fine. I've cast cloaking magic and a suitably durable windbreak spell, so fly as fast as you please."

Ah, capable Lord Viol, as ever.

Lord Viol's assistance was why I was comfortable, even traveling at such high speeds. Lord Viol's thoughtfulness filled me with happiness, and my spirits soared even higher.

"It's been a long time since I've been able to fly in such an exhilarating way. And to be able to fly with you, Lord Viol... Goodness, I'm so happy; I feel like I could soar."

"Me too. ...Finally, I can hold you in my arms like this, Lady Seren."

What? I thought, but just then, I felt him hugging me tightly from behind.

"Ah, um..."

"It's nice to ride behind you. I can hold on to you to stay steady."

Those words were whispered right above my ears, and my whole body suddenly became hot.

After all, I had never felt Lord Viol's body temperature so close before.

Until then, the exhilaration of flying in the sky for the first time in a long time had held my attention. But suddenly, I was essentially being embraced by Lord Viol, and my heart rate steadily increased.

When we went to subjugate the magical beasts for my exam entry, we were almost as close as this, but Lord Viol's words and actions made this time feel special.

I fretted that my heartbeat might be transmitted through my back and through Lord Viol's arms, which were holding me tightly.

But I could feel Lord Viol's heartbeat through my back. I felt embarrassed but

happy... Those feelings welled up in me.

Was Lord Viol as nervous as I was?

“...Feeling someone’s warmth really is nice.” With a small murmur, Lord Viol hugged me even tighter.

“Lord Viol...?”

“It feels good to be hugged and stroked, but it’s even nicer to hold someone like this.” Lord Viol said that in such a blissful tone that I flushed as if my face were about to boil.

The warmth I could feel on my back, the sound of his heart, his deep voice, and the breath I heard in my ears—they stimulated all five of my senses.

I didn’t expect to get this excited only a few minutes after leaving my residence.

We hadn’t even reached the plains, but the sensation of my heart almost about to burst felt dangerous, and I increased our speed even more.

I wanted to reach that tree in the plains as soon as possible. That was where Lord Viol and I had eaten lunch during that first subjugation jaunt.

We passed through the town and crossed the plains.

After becoming a High Mage, I received magic instruction in a special curriculum created by Lord Viol, and compared to a few months ago, I could handle my magic even better than before. The cart, with us on board, steadily increased in speed and advanced across the plains until eventually, the large tree on the hill came into view.

I’d wanted to get there as soon as possible, but as we drew closer, I felt sad that this time would end. Feeling a disappointment I couldn’t name, I turned around and looked up at Lord Viol, my eyes meeting his own jet-black ones.

His eyes were so kind, and my heart beat louder and louder.



“**SO**, how did it feel for you to be the one getting hugged?”

“I was so embarrassed that I felt like I was going to explode...”

Under the large tree at our destination, Lord Viol laughed happily.

These days, Lord Viol was much more expressive. The corners of his mouth were slightly raised, and the edges of his eyes were gently relaxed, but he was clearly smiling.

When Lord Viol smiled, his clever aura softened to a gentler one. I couldn't help but fall more and more in love.

"At first, I struggled with those feelings too," he admitted.

"Oh yes, come to think of it, Vi used to flail around... I'm sorry."

He often had to warn me, saying, "Your face is much too close." I understood now how he felt.

"But being the one to hug you is much more fun than I'd imagined."

"It's fun...?"

"Yes. It's so cute when I can feel you stiffen up yet still remain in my arms. It's hard to explain, but...it's the same feeling of warmth I get in my chest when I devise a new form of magic."

Surprised to hear him describe it as fun, I repeated his words, seeking clarification, but Lord Viol's explanation only made me feel even more embarrassed.

To think Lord Viol was thinking about it in those terms.

"When I think about you feeling the same as you held me...it makes me feel such pure joy. I understand what made you want to squish and squeeze me," he said.

I had a feeling it was different from how I felt when I cuddled Vi... But Lord Viol seemed so happy that I couldn't say anything.

"Ah, the wind feels good today." Lord Viol muttered to himself, gazing out over the plains.

Every time a refreshing breeze blew, it ruffled his shiny black hair, captivating me. It had been a long time since I'd spent time with Lord Viol like this, out on the bright plains, under such a blue sky.

“The sun is so warm, and the scent of the grass is so pleasant.”

Stretching himself with a “*Mmm*,” Lord Viol lay down on the grass.

Just like a cat.

Eyes closed comfortably as if he were about to fall asleep.

I watched him, smiling. Lord Viol’s profile, as he lay there enjoying the breeze and sunshine of the plains, was so beautiful that I was captivated.

When Lord Viol invited me to go out with him today, I wondered why he wanted to go to the plains when we weren’t even going to subjugate any beasts, but overall... I was glad we’d come here.

Out here in the plains, away from everyone else, I could savor the precious moment, just him and me together.

A calm time, where only the faint rustling of grass and leaves could be heard.

However, every time I looked at Lord Viol’s calm profile, my chest felt soft and warm, my heart beat faster, my chest tightened, and I felt swept up by strange emotions.

At the same time, though, I felt so satisfied...

Being with Vi feels like happiness, calmness, cuteness, and excitement. But when I’m with Lord Viol, various emotions intricately intertwine.

Even though I know Vi and Lord Viol are the same, I couldn’t help but be thrown off by their different appearances. It even made me laugh, but all I could do was wait until I adjusted.

That said, I loved both of them, and just being with them made me happy, so maybe things were fine the way they were.

I wonder how long we stayed there, enjoying the breeze?

“...This is happiness.” Slowly, Lord Viol muttered, “It feels good to be with you. Like bathing in a sunbeam. Relaxed and warm inside.”

“...I’m glad. I’m happy just being with you, too, Lord Viol.”

I was pleased that Lord Viol was happy in this peaceful moment with just the two of us, the breeze blowing over us, neither of us speaking. And so, I spoke

honestly about my feelings, too.

Slowly, Lord Viol sat up and looked at me.

“Really? Are you happy just to be with me?”

“Yes...”

My face turned red. I realized I’d said something quite embarrassing and couldn’t look Lord Viol in the face.

“I see. Me too.”

“Really...?”

“Just being by your side, Lady Seren, gives me immense satisfaction.”

When I lifted my gaze in surprise, Lord Viol’s face was alive with emotion in a way I’d never seen. His smile was so dazzling, I could hardly breathe.

Just being by my side made him satisfied...? Oh, I was so thrilled; heat welled up inside me.

“Wh-Why are you crying?” he asked.

“Because I’m happy...”

“I-Is that so? So those are tears of joy? I worried for a second.”

“Hehe, I’m sorry. Lord Viol, um, would you like to have lunch soon? I had Jean make a lot of delicious sweets.”

Embarrassed by my tears, I tried to change the subject, but Lord Viol’s brows drew together. After a moment, he spoke.

“No, let’s not. It’s too distracting when I see sweets. First of all, there’s something I want to talk to you about today.”

“Okay...”

Lord Viol’s expression suddenly grew serious, making me straighten up without realizing I was doing it. Then Lord Viol brought his face closer to mine for a moment, and I felt like his pitch-black, mysterious eyes were sucking me in. My heart hammered fast.

“I’ve been waiting for this day for the past three months,” he said.

“Y-Yes.”

“Lady Seren, as I said earlier, I’m happy when I’m with you. I want to spend as much time as possible with you. Lady Seren, I love you.”

Tears spilled down my cheeks again. Though I saw the alarm in Lord Viol’s gaze, I couldn’t stop them from falling.

“I, I also... I love you too, Lord Viol...!”

“Really?! Oh, I’m so glad!!!” Then he hugged me tightly. “I’m so relieved... I love you, Lady Seren.”

Lord Viol whispered and sighed into my ear, and I was overwhelmed with emotion. I put my arms around his back and hugged him tight, too.

After all, I’d been waiting for this day for a long time.

With the two of us snuggled up close and hugging tightly, I could feel his warmth and hear his heartbeat directly, and I was beside myself with happiness and bliss.

“Lady Seren.”

Hearing him speak my name so softly, I looked up, and he rained light kisses on my temples and the corners of my eyes.

“...!”

My body temperature rose explosively. I couldn’t even speak.

I couldn’t take my eyes off Lord Viol’s black eyes.

As his eyes narrowed affectionately, Lord Viol’s warm palm gently stroked my hair. Twice, three times, his hand stroked my head.

I couldn’t even move; I just stared at Lord Viol.

“Every time you stroked me, smooched me, or kissed me, all I wanted was to do the same to you. Finally, my wish came true.”

Lord Viol spoke mischievously, and I blushed and shook my head.

“That’s because you forced yourself to hold back and put up with it like a real cat would do...”

“Naturally. Remember how jealous I got when I saw you petting another cat? I have to be jealous of cats and human men, so it’s pretty tough. It’s the first time I’ve felt like this, so I was confused, you see.”

“Oh, honestly...” I laughed. I really didn’t think there was any need for him to be jealous of cats.

“In order for me not to have to endure such jealousy, I wanted, if you were amenable to it, for us to live together... But I realize we can’t possibly get married without a proper relationship or engagement period happening first.”

“Married...?”

Was Lord Viol really thinking about that already?

“It will probably require a longer waiting period so that you don’t get a bad reputation, but I wanted to secure your agreement for us to live together before something changes your mind. I think I’ll have a chat with Borden about it.”

“Oh my, I’d never change my mind, Lord Viol. You’re kind. You listen to me carefully. You guide me, and I’m happy to be with you. And no other man I know has the ability to become an adorable black cat.”

“Hahaha, it’s true that I’m the only one who can become a cat these days.”

“Aside from the fact that you can transform into Vi, I love you so much I couldn’t imagine wanting to be with anyone but you.”

I was surprised he’d worry about things like me changing my mind, and I spoke with some indignance. In response, Lord Viol smiled happily.

“I see. That’s a relief. Then, if the situation allows, would you be my wife?”

He spoke lightly, but this... This was a proposal, wasn’t it?

Those words, spoken with a lovestruck expression as he held me tightly in his arms... It all seemed a bit too dreamlike, somehow unrealistic.

Earlier, Lord Viol had said something about jealousy, but he’d become much more expressive these days. Recently he’d become dramatically more popular with the ladies.

He didn't seem to care about that, though... Or rather, he didn't even seem to notice, but I couldn't help but worry about it. I was the one with a reason to be jealous.

I mean, I wanted to keep Lord Viol all to myself, too.

Staring firmly into his jet-black eyes, I spoke my own thoughts.

"Yes. Please, Lord Viol, make me your wife."

Lord Viol hugged me tighter than ever before.

"Oh, Lady Seren...!"

His gaze on me was so fiery I couldn't take it and squeezed my eyes shut. My lips, open just enough to take tiny breaths, were then captured by Lord Viol's soft kiss.





“**THAT** chef of yours, Jean, really is skilled. The roll cake and the sponge cake we have today are so soft, they practically melt in the mouth.”

After eating lunch and enjoying dessert, Lord Viol seemed as delighted as ever.

After being held by him, hearing his sweet words, and experiencing his passionate kiss, I was breathless and stunned.

Seeing how much I was swooning, Lord Viol gently released me and suggested lunch. Thanks to that, I calmed down a little, but never before had we exchanged such sweet words or such passion. I wasn't quite able to recover my composure.

Lord Viol hadn't minced his words, either. He was so straightforward with his feelings. I had never heard of him having any other ladies in his life before me, but with how suave he was, I felt the need to question his relationship history.

“Here, Lady Seren. You should have some, too. It's magnificent.”

Smiling, Lord Viol pinched up a piece of roll cake and brought it to my lips. It was as if he was enjoying the chance to be the one hand-feeding me.

“You seemed to enjoy doing this a lot to me as Vi, so now it's my turn.”

As he chuckled devilishly, I felt like giving myself over to him completely. And so I took a bite of the proffered bit of cake.

Did he, perhaps, plan to do to me all the things I had done to Vi? Goodness, what had I done to Vi again? I tried to think back over it and realized I'd done some daring things.

I snuck a peek up at Lord Viol, who was watching me with satisfaction in his eyes.

Well, as long as Lord Viol was happy, anything was fine with me.

Thinking that Lord Viol and I would always be together from now on made my heart pound, and I knew happy days would be waiting for us ahead.

Bathed in the pleasant breeze, we smiled at one another, our happiness

complete.



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4



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